

ACTIVE LEARNING TOOLKIT

**Higher Education Committee,
Association for Art History.**

Compiled from a workshop at the Association for
Art History Annual Conference, University of York.

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Introduction

This toolkit presents a range of activities that are designed to engage students with art historical themes and approaches beyond the usual classroom activities. The toolkit also presents how these activities build towards 'authentic assessment', whether formative or summative. Authentic assessment has been covered by a previous Higher Education Committee report, and this toolkit is designed to be used alongside it (see bibliography for link). The activities and overview of active learning for art history presented here are from educators working with art students, art history students, and students from other disciplines studying art history. These are only a starting point, and there are more resources indicated at the end of each activity section, where relevant, and in the general bibliography at the end of the toolkit.

The toolkit draws on examples discussed at the workshop run by the Higher Education Committee at the Association for Art History Annual Conference in April 2025, York University.

The workshop was built around the following questions:

- In the face of students' anxiety around assessment, and an instrumental approach to learning that prioritises what is needed to pass a module, how can active learning strategies link to authentic assessment?
- What are the tasks that we can set students to build their confidence and enjoyment in learning, and subsequently succeed in modes of assessment that go beyond the standard academic essay?
- How can active learning give students confidence that they are building the transferable skills that they will need beyond university?

Participants discussed how they engage students in the seminar room, the lecture theatre and in their self-directed learning time. Key considerations were on how to create learning

environments that demonstrate the value of intellectual curiosity while building students' transferable skills.

There is a lot of detail in the activities outlined in the toolkit. There were other discussions on the uses of different forms of authentic assessment and how to share these beyond the internal university setting: from websites of collective bibliographies and exhibition reviews, to sending zines made in class to a local zine library. There was also discussion of how to get professional voices in the classroom, and how recorded content from professionals such as curators, artists, writers can be used for a number of groups of students. Participants also discussed general classroom activities such as asking students to write in class every week, or use miro boards for interaction with larger groups.

Active Learning is a teaching method that focusses on student engagement. In order to kick off discussion, educators in the workshop were asked to take a moment to reflect upon how they engage students and what kind of educators they are or could be to have the most impact.

A brief summary of relevant methodologies were described, including:

- Backward Design based upon *Understanding by Design* by Wiggins and McTighe (a teaching approach based on moving backwards, and planning lessons based upon the desired student learning outcomes);
- Small Teaching by Darby and Lang (which offers small but powerful changes for teachers based on active learning principles);
- and two Taxonomies or categorization of educational goals and methods.

The first, *Bloom's Taxonomy* is based upon cognitive skills, which is a useful resource for drafting learning objectives. Fink's taxonomy of *Significant Learning*, focusses upon the dimensions of learning such as learning how to learn, applications and integration of knowledge.

References are included in the bibliography at the end of this document.

Types of Active Learning Activities

Exhibition project

A number of variations on an exhibition project (both speculative and realised) are presented here.

Learning Outcome: To understand how research, thematic argument and practical considerations shape the work of curation. To collaborate with peers and present ideas to a range of audiences. To give constructive feedback to peers.

Active Learning Activity: Groups of students propose an exhibition concept. The group is tasked with creating an exhibition proposal that justifies the space used, range of artists chosen and gives samples of exhibition wall labels and other texts such as marketing materials. This can be a speculative proposal, but students should outline a real venue, and give a realistic exhibition plan, timeline, and communication plan.

Variations:

- As part of the exhibition project, students pitch their proposal to a local artist-run space to exhibit in. The successful exhibition is realised.
- For art students, they can choose themselves as one of four artists being proposed in the group exhibition, and locate their practice within a constellation of others. This can be done as a virtual exhibition.
- Rather than propose a real venue, students can propose a speculative or fictional venue as a form of institutional critique, and imagining future institutions.
- Invite curators or other artworld professionals to give a 'crit' on the proposals, offering insights from their experience.

Authentic Assessment: The elements of the exhibition proposal, exhibition plan, sample wall texts and catalogue texts, timeline and marketing plan/materials are presented as a portfolio for assessment. There can be presentations made outlining the exhibition proposal, with one variation including a student led 'jury' who is tasked with assessing the proposals and choosing which one is successful. The jury would also give feedback to each exhibition group on the merits of their proposal. This variation is particularly successful with art students who will need to submit applications to various competitions.

Free writing

Also see the full module "Art Writing".

Close looking, free writing and group discussion

Learning Outcome: To develop key skills in visual analysis, both orally and in writing, and especially in response to close first-hand experience of works of art (BA1)

Active Learning activity: Ask students to go round an exhibition/display and choose an artwork or room to write about. Ask them to write about what they see, think about and reflect upon as they sit there for around 15 minutes. This is about close looking, slow looking, allowing time in writing to go from description to forms of analysis, whether that is personal reflection, contextual considerations, or visual analysis, or a combination. Encourage students to write freely, without having a predetermined idea of what kind of writing they will end up with.

You can suggest some ways in: writing a series of descriptive words, writing closely what you can see, trying both zoom in and zoom out from the artwork, write what you feel when you sit there in the room, write what thoughts come to mind as you look, however distant from the artwork itself.

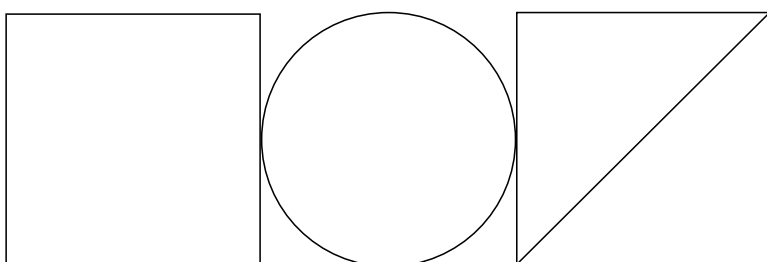
Ask the students to share what they have written (or part of it, or why they don't want to share, but how they found the experience) as the group goes round the exhibition together. You should also share your writing and reflections.

You can then think about what kind of writing could feed into an essay about that artwork or exhibition, or how it might be used as part of an exhibition review, or as part of a podcast. What might be a hook for the reader/listener? What might open up an aspect of an argument through close looking and describing? How could you use this encounter with an artwork as the start of an academic piece of writing, or a review, or a something else?

Variations:

- Ask students to draw the artwork/area they have chosen and then write about it. Ask them to reflect on what this did to their close looking.
- Get students to write about the same artwork and discuss the differences between their texts.
- Get students to complete the writing exercise in self-directed visits, giving them a choice of venues/one venue. Get them to bring their writing to class and share in a small peer group. They can then share their conclusions with the bigger group.
- Get students to upload their short pieces of writing to a blog/VLE page so they can read each others' texts and comment.

Authentic Assessment: This activity is very flexible and can be fed into students working on an exhibition review, or podcast. It can also be used as a way of developing a 'personal or authorial voice' in a conventional essay. It can be used for all levels of students.



Defining New Aesthetic Categories

Learning Outcome: To understand what might constitute an 'aesthetic category' building on the work of Sianne Ngai, and developing skills of looking, identification and argumentation within visual culture broadly defined.

Active Learning Activity: Responding to Sianne Ngai's definition of the aesthetic categories 'zany, interesting and cute', ask students to define their own categories based on what they see and experience day-to-day. These categories can be presented to the class in short 5-minute presentations that gather visual examples of the category, name it and define some of its key features. Encourage creativity and engagement with fashion, music cultures as well as art and film.

The presentations may build from a class reading or discussion of Ngai's argument, or from the student's own reading. They might reflect on their own categories in relation to Ngai's larger thesis around hypercommodification.

Variations:

- Exchange the presentation for an illustrated submission. This could take the form of a powerpoint deck, a magazine feature or a zine.

Authentic Assessment: This exercise was originally designed as an in-classroom task, but it could be redefined as an assessment feeding into a display project or for an alternative form of argumentation, including as suggested above, a magazine feature.

Close writing

Learning outcome: To use close looking to undertake visual and critical analysis.

Active Learning Activity: Students are asked to write about one object over a 45 minute period. They are given different prompts for each 15 minute section, provided by different lecturers. At the end of the 45 minutes, students reflect on the difference the prompts have made to their close looking and writing.

Authentic Assessment: This is designed as a formative activity that develops students' own authorial voice when writing about artworks. It also develops their awareness of how prompts/questions/perspectives can impact visual analysis.

Generative AI and visual analysis

A short activity to begin discussion with students about the shortfalls of using Generative AI for their writing.

The lecturer prepares by asking GenAI (such as Chat GPT) to describe an object (you might want to do this for an object that is less well-known than canonical works of Western art history). The lecturer also writes their own description of the object. Students are asked to mark the GenAI visual analysis compared with the lecturer's text.

Presentation

Performance anxiety

The group discussed how presentations were often anxiety provoking for students, but there were a range of techniques that could make the experience more enjoyable or tolerable. These included:

- Specific sessions on the performance skills needed when presenting.
- Specific sessions on other presentation contexts that students will need in real life, such as interviews.
- Encouraging 'active listening', making the 'success' of the presentation a collective responsibility which is as much to do with the quality of questions and responses as the presented ideas. To do this, presentations can be given to very small groups of peers, with one person taking notes, one person asking questions, and the lecturer dropping in as the presentations took place.
- Staging debates – ask students to argue for or against the restitution of a cultural object.

Understanding the Past from the Present

Learning Outcome: Understand and evaluate the Camden Town Group, the London Group and the Bloomsbury Group within the development of early 20th century Modern Art in London.

Active Learning Activity: [This was an activity designed for a small-ish group of students who were mainly Business majors. The aim was to identify a skillset familiar to students and use art as a bridge to engage their understanding and creativity.]

Pre-class task: Students were asked to write a short What? Who? Why? outline of three early 20th century London art groups: The Camden Town Group - The London Group - The Bloomsbury Group

During class: Students were asked to get into teams of two or three students and were assigned one of the three groups. They were then given a relevant literary resource that specifically described the group and this was also intended to encourage them to revert to library resources). They were given 30 minutes to prepare a three page powerpoint/pdf business presentation that set out each of the groups Mission/Aims, their values/what they did/deliverables, their target audience and also an assessment of their impact. They presented these to the class.

Authentic Assessment: This was a formative assessment that considered the development and individual aims of art groups in London during the early 20th century. It was not only intended to add to their knowledge and preparation for an assignment that compared the art and artists' groups over different periods but also a wider aim of the course that considered the changing relationship between artwork and artist, art audience/art public, museum and ultimately the curator.

Performance

Understanding performance art

Learning Outcome: To critically engage with histories of performance art, and develop an informed approach to writing about performance art and its documentation.

Active Learning activity: Choose a short piece of performance art that can be seen through video and/or photographs, as well as written description. Ask students to review and discuss all the performance documentation, and then devise a mode of re-performing this work in the classroom. If you have time, you can do this over two sessions, with the second session allowing for students to arrange for props, etc. Following the re-performance, reflect on how the act of re-performance, as well as preparing and watching, has changed the group's understanding of the work from the original viewing and researching.

Authentic Assessment: This can be fed into a critical reflection on the performance work, or used as formative work that then extends student's individual writing on performance, preparing them to work with the complexities of performance documentation.

On site learning

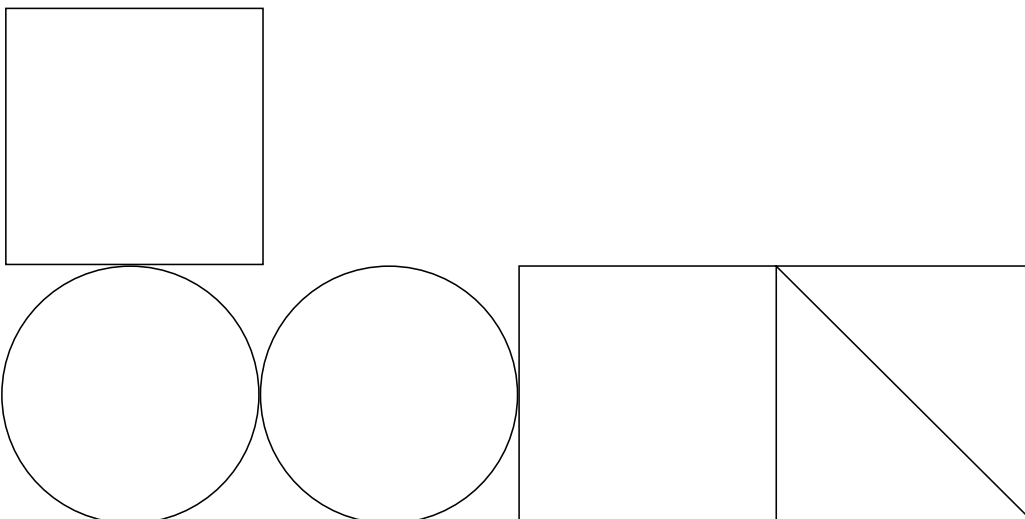
See also some of the activities under the section "Free Writing", and the full module outline for "Objects of Art History".

Intermediality in display

Learning Outcome: To activate lecture room thinking about the connections between objects and theories, encompassing close looking, theories of intermediality and critical engagement with issues of display.

Active Learning activity: In a museum, gallery or heritage setting, go round on your own or in small groups. Choose a section of a display that interests you. Think about the objects contained therein as well as the space between them, with reference to form and meaning. Make historic and contemporary links where possible, explaining how and why the objects work together and critiquing the curation, giving reasons for your recommendations. Present to the rest of the group in front of the display and take questions.

Authentic Assessment: This is a formative assessment that can feed into preparation for a written summative assignment, whilst also helping to develop students' oral presentation skills.



Literature reviews and Bibliographies

The group discussed activities around literature reviews and bibliographies that could scaffold student's research as they worked towards a dissertation or final essay. Some suggestions are below.

Students write a literature review of 250 words for 6 texts, writing one per week. These form the preparation for their dissertation, and can be shared with their peer group as well as the lecturer.

Collective Bibliography

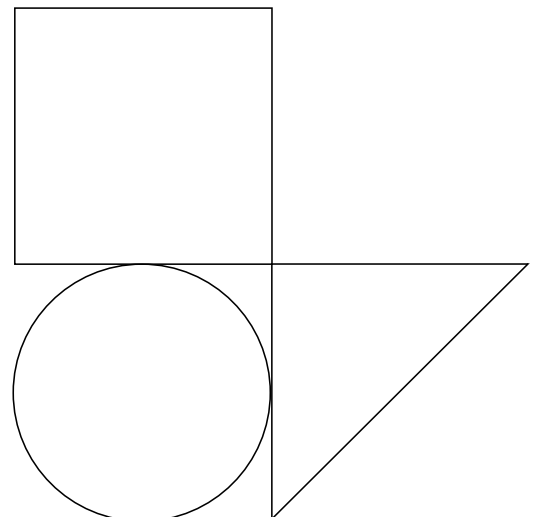
Learning Outcome: To substantively engage with one academic source, summarizing its key arguments and asking critical questions about its approach. To scaffold towards the student's final research assignment in a supportive and collective way.

Active Learning activity: Students are asked to select an academic source that they are considering using for their final research paper/assignment, and write a short summary about the source (covering its argument/asking critical questions about its methodology) to contribute to a collective bibliography.

The collective bibliography (with all student entries/summaries) will be made available online for all students to access. After the assignment deadline, students are encouraged to use the collective bibliography to find new research that they can use for their final papers/assignments. A minimum or maximum amount of entries used on a final assignment could be stipulated.

The instructor may submit an entry to the collective bibliography as well, in part to model the correct formatting for the assignment, but also to emphasize its collective nature.

Authentic Assessment: This small assignment is designed to emphasize the collective or social nature of academic research, prompting students to think about how they can contribute meaningfully to the research practices of their peers. Students are also encouraged to download the full list and use it as a resource in their future studies.



Full modules

“Objects of Art History”, BA1

Learning Outcomes: To engage with art works in the contexts of collection and display. To encourage students to interact with works held in Cambridge (and local) collections. To prompt a critical awareness of those sites.

Active Learning activity: Objects of Art History is a Part I core course in the History of Art BA degree at Cambridge. The course is entirely comprised of fieldtrips to key collections, displays and buildings in the city and the surrounding area.

We aim for every department member to contribute to the course, along with associate teaching staff, college employees and those in museums and galleries.

Contributors devise topics with the convenor, which correspond to the following guidance:

- to introduce students to Cambridge collections, providing a foundation for further study
- to teach skills unique to object-based learning, including close looking, object-handling, recognition of materials and processes
- to make students aware of the conditions in which they meet artworks and museum objects through understanding collection histories, development and acquisition, conservation, and curatorial decision-making

Authentic Assessment: Objects is assessed by a portfolio consisting of three elements:

Catalogue entry (750–1,000 words) which equals 20% of course mark; **Exhibition review (1,000–1,250 words)**, which equals 30% of course mark and **Collection display, with rationale and wall text (1,400–1,800 words)**, which equals 50% of course mark.

Example guidance for Task 3:

Task 3: Collection Display

In this task you are required to propose a small collection display for one of four Cambridge locations: The Octagon, Fitzwilliam Museum, St Peter’s Chapel, adjacent to Kettle’s Yard, The University Library Gallery & The Heong Gallery, Downing College

Your exhibition must contain no fewer than 8 works and no more than 12 works. Although your proposed display should make sense for the institution you select, objects may be drawn from other collections. At least half your objects should be in Cambridge collections. In your text, you must justify your selection of each work included.

Task 3 should comprise four elements: a rationale for the display (**1,000–1,200**); an introductory wall text (**300 words**); two extended captions for two objects in the display (**100 words each**); illustrations of the objects in the display.

Bear in mind that the rationale should be legible to both a specialist curatorial team and non-specialist museum staff; and that both the introductory wall text and extended captions should be legible to a general audience. Advice on writing for different audiences will be provided in the dedicated skills sessions. This exercise is designed to encourage you to think as a curator, considering the diverse needs of different audiences (including how to provide an engaging as well as instructive viewing experience), how to provide a coherent narrative through a combination of images and text, and the opportunities and constraints of different locations for mounting exhibitions.

Final year module: Art Writing

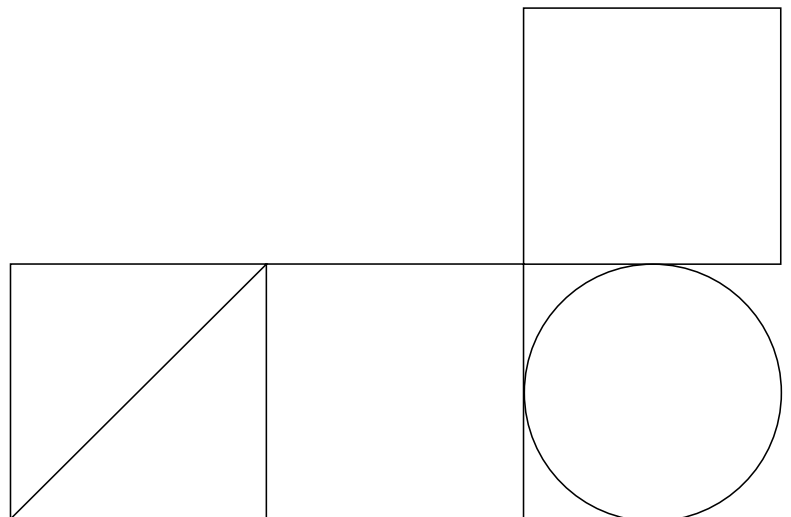
Learning Outcomes: To understand different modes of art writing. To develop a sophisticated and versatile authorial voice. To combine critical and creative modes of writing.

Active Learning Activity: This final year module explores different modes of art writing, with sessions on zines, poetry, essay, etc. Students work on a portfolio of 3 pieces of writing that come to 8000 words altogether. These 3 pieces must be written in different modes. Some sessions include reading texts out loud, and all students create a performance piece for one session. Students would also peer review each other's texts, starting with an exhibition review. This process allowed them to understand how others were writing, and to learn by example.

Variation:

- A microsite is used to share all the student exhibition reviews on the module.

Authentic Assessment: A writing portfolio consisting of 3 pieces of writing, all in different styles. This module encourages the use of the essay as a form of authentic assessment, with the use of the first person and affective relationships to research.



Contextual information and Bibliography

If you are interested in finding out more about the HEC or would like to join, please email your local area rep: <https://forarthistory.org.uk/about/who-we-are/committees/higher-education-committee/>

Higher Education Committee resource on Authentic Assessment, compiled by Samuel Raybone, 2023. To access, click on the link titled "Assessment in Art History" on the Higher Education Committee resources page: <https://forarthistory.org.uk/about/who-we-are/committees/higher-education-resources/>

References from Workshop Introduction (compiled by Sophie Kazan)

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