

Imagining: Portrait piece

Aim of the exercise:

Getting to know your descriptive strengths as a writer

Begin by choosing a portrait: a picture, sculpture, or photograph of a person from the selection of portraits below, from the V&A galleries.



Decide whether you are going to write a poem or a short piece of prose. If you are writing a poem limit yourself to 40 lines or less. If you are writing prose, limit yourself to fewer than 1000 words. This word limit means that you have to aim to produce maximum impact with a small amount of text.

Write down the title of the portrait. This is going to be the title of your piece of writing.

You are going to write a piece in the first person: one in which the main character tells his or her story directly to the reader. So whether you are writing poetry or prose, your piece should begin 'I am' followed by the name of the person in the portrait.

If the person in the portrait is someone whose name is known, then your piece will begin in a way that is similar to this example: 'I am the dancer, Josephine Baker ...'

If the name of the person in the portrait is not known, then you may end up with a beginning that is similar to this: 'I am the boy in blue ...'

Whatever you write at this point will be conditioned by what you know about the person in the portrait.

Once you have your first line, forget your first person narrator for the moment. Write a set of notes about what you yourself see in the portrait.

Ask yourself:

- What details you notice first and second?
- What do you notice about the person's clothes?
- What do you notice about their face and expression?
- How old are they?
- What social class do they come from?
- Has their life been hard or easy?
- How tall are they?

In addition, write down details about colours, textures, and, if appropriate, the way the light falls in the picture.

Think about what these details tell you about the person depicted. Make your notes as detailed as possible.

You should now have:

- your title
- an opening line or sentence
- a set of detailed notes about the picture that you can use as the basis for a first person narrative

Write down the following closing line: 'How much of me do you really see?'

The next step

If you are in a V&A gallery, leave it for now and go and work elsewhere. The garden is a pleasant place to sit. Or you might feel like a drink in one of the cafés. Otherwise, you can find a corner in one of the quieter galleries: Ceramics is often peaceful, and you can sit on one of the portable gallery chairs.

If you are working from the website, take your notes away from the computer. Preferably switch it off for a while or go into another room.

The idea of this exercise is that you use the notes you have (plus title and opening and closing lines) to write either a short poem or very short, short story, in the first person, without constantly referring to the portrait.

When you have written a first draft of your first person poem or story (using the notes you made) go back to the portrait in the gallery or on the website. Look at it then re-read your draft. Look back at the portrait and re-read your draft a second time. Then ask yourself the following questions:

- How well did your piece of writing capture the portrait? Are you pleased with it as a whole piece, or only with some passages of it?
- What elements of the portrait did it convey well?
- What aspects of the portrait did it miss?

- Did writing notes as yourself and then turning these into a first person narrative give you a sense of two separate ways 'in' to the portrait?
- What was the effect of already having your first and last lines? Would you alter these if you wrote the piece out again?
- What was your best line or sentence, and why? (Ask yourself, if you could only keep one line or sentence, which would it be, and why?)
- What would you do differently should you do the exercise again?
- Were your notes good? What should you have noted more thoroughly?
- Did you end up with a piece of work that was a description of what is shown in the portrait? Or did you use the portrait as a leaping off point for something more imaginative?

Because you work without having the portrait in front of you, relying instead on the notes you have made, this exercise tells you something about what you see when you look at a piece of art, and how you can make other people see what you see.

Remember, when reading a poem or story inspired by a picture, sculpture or similar artwork, the reader doesn't usually have a copy of this in front of them. It's up to the writer to convey the feeling of the picture or artwork to the reader.