

**'Curriculum Unit**  
**"Word Play"**  
**Grades 6, 7 and 8**

**How can words and images be used to wield power?**

How do words influence us personally/as a society?

How do visual images and text communicate in different ways?

Do words stimulate emotion?

Can words change people/society?

**Unit Overview:** Students will discuss and analyze various forms of art disciplines (visual, literature, spoken) involving text and consider how profoundly they are affected by the written and spoken word. Using images that use words for protest, propaganda, humor, irony..., as well as text as an art form in and of itself, students will create a series of works using the written word, culminating in a highly personal artwork incorporating text, using materials of their own choosing.

Students will learn how words affect them and others, begin to look for deeper meaning embedded within text and images, and be more critical of how they process and use words (orally, in written form, and in connection with visual imagery).

**Interdisciplinary:** The eighth grade will be working this into the reading of "The Book Thief" by Marcus Zuzack as a cross-curriculum unit with the ELA teacher. *This book was the catalyst for this unit. It is a story about a young girl in WWII Germany who begins stealing books with the loss of her family even though she cannot read. There is a wonderful moment in the book where a Jewish refugee who is hiding out in her adopted family's basement writes her a story over painted pages of Mein Kampf. He alters a book that has devastated him to create a new story explaining his life and his relationship with the young girl.*

Questions for discussion:

How do words elicit emotion?

How do they impact an audience?

Can fiction teach?

Have you been changed by a book/story?

**Writing lesson: Homework:**

Think of a time when you were moved by words. Was it a song/a verbal exchange/text or social media post/book or poem you read/a quote...? Write down how you were affected. What were you feeling? Were you hurt/did you feel loved/were you moved by another person...? Consider this moment and express your feelings in a poem/story/letter...

## **Lesson 1**

### **Two classes**

#### **“Reconfiguring the News”**

##### **Essential Questions:**

- Can words change the course of history?
- Are news items partial or impartial?
- Can you recall a time when you have been tricked by words?

**Purpose:** Students will compare and contrast different news sources in order to understand how the placement of words/pictures can change the impact on the reader. Students will consider how they read the news and learn how to discern fact from opinion by altering news items themselves. Understanding how easily words can be manipulated for drama/bias/attention will make them more informed readers.

**Performance Objective:** Students will view the headlines of their local papers from the same date and compare and contrast the different layouts and headlines to consider the paper’s point of view (is it fair and balanced?). Students will also view and analyze the artworks of Jenny Holzer , Jasper Johns, Shanti Grumbine, Barbara Kruger, Mark Bradford and Andy Warhol’s *Death and Disaster* series to see how artists use words from news or popular culture to send a message or highlight an issue.

\*Based on an Art21 lesson- Students will create a collage with image and text from newspapers that incorporates found or drawn images with an existing text, or random words with an existing image to create a new context that juxtaposes or calls into question the relationship between the two elements.

**Learning Objectives:** Students will learn...

- how placement of words/pictures can change the meaning of a subject and its impact on the reader
- how words can be manipulated to create drama/influence the reader
- how to discern fact from opinion in the news items they read
- how to question the information they receive
- how to create a collage that changes the context of existing words/images

**Vocabulary:** juxtaposition, redaction

**Materials:** NY Daily News, New York Times, New York Post, glue, scissors, colored pencils, watercolors, markers.

**Journal Reflection:** How do newspapers use words to exert influence? Is it possible to report fair and balanced news? If you were a reporter could you be totally unbiased?

## **Lesson 2**

### **Two classes**

#### **“Tongue Twisted”**

**Essential Questions:** Note: a good portion of this lesson will be discussion. I would like the students to consider how words that are dangerous seep into the common language sometimes and question whether or not this makes them benign or more dangerous. For example; when a racist, disparaging or sexist word is used as an endearment

How does language evolve to incorporate new trends, ideas or events?

Are the changes constant or is there an ebb and flow?

How do words or phrases make their way into everyday language?

What are words that are taboo? Why are they taboo? Are they dangerous/hurtful/offensive? Share your ideas and opinions about these words?

Does the constant use of some of these words/phrases change their meaning?

How is your language different from your parents/grandparents/teachers?

Have you ever created a new word or phrase that became a part of your everyday language?

**Purpose:** Students will consider the language they use/hear/read and how language and meaning change depending on the context in which language is used. Students will begin to understand how language is alive and ever-changing and how easily we adapt to these changes in order to communicate with each other. Students will view the works of artists who play with the use of words and images. Artists referenced: Edward Ruscha, Neil Jenney, Mark Tansey, Allen Ruppersberg, Trenton Doyle Hancock.

**Performance Objective:** Notebook work/group work (2 activities)

-Working in their notebooks and in groups students will create/use a pun, palindrome, figure of speech or word play and illustrate the words with a visual image. Teacher will give some examples to start off.

-Students will write down verbs and add them to a box for everyone to pick from randomly. Each student will illustrate the verb they choose.

**Journal Reflection:** Write down common words/phrases you use when talking with your friends. Create a journal page with some of these words. You can make it decorative/a collage/a design of the words/different fonts...Consider the context in which they are used. Are some words used in fun/in anger/in joy/...Can you make the words look like your emotions?

-Something to think about: What are the dangers of being able to quickly adapt to how language is used?

**Learning Objectives:**

Students will learn...

- how language and meaning change depending on the context in which language is used.
- how they personally communicate with others through language and how their language may change with their audience
- that language is always evolving and be able to look at their own way of communicating to find this evidence Example: coded words with friends/makeup words that become a part of their language...
- how to make text come alive visually by using it as an art form
- how other artists use text visually and emotionally
- how to play with words to create different meanings

### **Lesson 3**

#### **Midway assignment, 4-6 classes “Altered Words”**

**Essential Questions:** How can you alter the meaning of someone else’s written word?

Questions for the eighth grade: In “The Book Thief” Max alters Hitler’s book “Mein Kampf” to tell the story of his friendship with Liesel. Why do you think the author had him alter “Mein Kampf”? How did the meaning of the book change with the altering and how do you think it affected Max and/or Liesel? Why did Max portray himself as a bird?

**Purpose:** Students will look at the works of altered book artists and find a poem in the open pages of an old book. They will illustrate their found poem on/in the pages of the book. The act of “finding” words from the pages of a book will help them consider the use of different words and how the meaning of words can be changed with placement and play. Artists referenced: A few artists from “Slash” exhibit at MAD Museum that use text in their work or as their work including book artists/altered books.

Doug Beube, Sue Blackwell, Arian Boussard, Lesley Dill, Brian Dettmer, Karol B. Kundstadt, Georgia Russel, Ann Hamilton

**Performance Objective:** Students will alter the meaning and physical appearance of an old book to create a new work of art influenced by words “found” in the open pages of the book that become a poem.

**Homework assignment:** (to be given the week before) Bring in a used book, preferably a hard cover book. Understand that this book will be altered and made into an art piece so do not bring in a book you want to save. It can be a book that has meaning to you or just a book that you know will be put in the trash.

**Task:** Open the pages of your book to a random spot, preferably the center. Scan the open pages and make note of words that catch your eye. Don’t worry if you don’t know the meaning of some of the words you can look them up. Consider words that create an image or evoke an emotion. When you start out

don't worry about how many you find, you will edit them later. Use these "found" words to create a poem. Be open to changing them and putting together words you would not consider. You will use the pages of the book and/or the book itself to illustrate your poem.

**Questions:** What does your poem mean to you? How will you illustrate this? Will you build up/dig in from the pages? Will you paint/cut/black out words that are not needed?

**Materials:** glue, paint, scissors, brushes, markers, pastels, construction paper

### **Learning Objectives**

Students will learn...

- how a used book can become a new art form
- how random words can be used to create new images and meanings images
- how words can inspire them visually
- about the works of altered book artists

### **Lesson 4,**

**One-two classes**

***Shout, Shout, Let it All Out***

**Essential Questions:** What are you passionate about?

What do you worry about? What do you want to change?

**Purpose:** Students will view the works of Maya Lin, Glen Ligon, Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer as well as word art from their own popular culture to consider how words can be used to inspire/incite/inform. Students will design a protest/statement t-shirt that is focused on an issue that they are passionate about.

### **Task: Design a protest/statement t-shirt-**

Think of an issue you are passionate about. Is it personal/political/ecological?

Write a paragraph telling us why you feel passionate about this subject. Is it something that you want to change? Is it something that needs to be informative? Pull out words from your paragraph that can make a statement if they stand on their own or with only a few words. Or, can you make a statement by using repetition?

Will you use a few words or a lot of words only highlighting the ones that state your case or will you take out/black out words to make a statement? Will the size and type of the font help you make your point?

Use these words to design a protest/statement t-shirt.

**Materials:** pencil, markers, paper, samples of text

**Homework:** Our next lesson will be a highly personal work of art that uses text in some way and addresses an injustice that you feel strongly about/a time you felt wronged or misunderstood/a bias you are struggling with or a time when you have felt a bias or injustice towards you. In your notebook write down your feelings on a personal bias/injustice you have experienced and consider how you would express this in a work that uses text.

**Learning Objectives:**

**Students will learn...**

- how other artists use the written word to protest, raise awareness, evoke emotion, inspire
- how they can use words make others aware of social, political, personal issues that they feel strongly about
- how their written words can be used to create dialogue
- how to choose and edit words carefully to achieve impact
- that they can have a voice

**Lesson 5- Final Lesson**

**3-6 classes**

***In My Own Words***

**Essential Questions:** How do artists/writers affect change? Can your words/artworks touch another person?  
Can the written word be considered art?  
In what ways?

**Purpose:** Students will begin by viewing the works of various artists who use text as an art form to inspire their approach to different mediums and use this time to consider their own material and aesthetic preferences. Beginning with an exploration of materials, students will scaffold off the lessons on text to decide on a form that will appropriately define a personal experience they have had with bias/injustice to create an artwork with materials of their choosing.

Students will be shown a Power Point presentation referencing the following artists: Cy Twombly, Jasper Johns, calligraphy work, Chinese writing, Allora & Calsadilla's "Chalk" (letters as symbols)...Mixed media works using images and words, Shahzia Sikander use of text – English words grounded meaning, mystery of Urdu text created spiritual connection. Youtube shorts on Jenny Holzer and Shahzia Sikander in which the artists talk about working with text.

**Videos to reference:** Art21 Exclusives

Beryl Korot "Babel: "The 7 minute Scroll"

Jessica Rankin: "Mind and Language"

Mark Bradford: "Paper"

**Task:** Consider the aesthetics of text/fonts and create something you think is visually striking that includes text and addresses an injustice that you feel strongly about/a time you felt wronged or misunderstood/a bias you are struggling with or a time when you have felt a bias towards you. Consider how bias/prejudice is formed. What are its origins?

**Motivation/Discussion:** Have you been moved/tricked/hurt by words? How does this feel? How can you visualize this feeling? Will you use color/absence of color/certain materials/images as well as text? Will the words you choose for your work be a scream or a whisper? Which thought do you feel would be more effective in your expression?

Consider playing with words and the materials you use as a way of expression. Color, brushstroke, soft, bold, marks, collage, layering meaning, photos, text from printed materials

2D or 3D, objects with their own meaning, symbols, other images...

How do artists/writers affect change? Can your words/artworks touch another person?

**Materials:** This is a mixed media piece and I would like to leave it open to the students. The first week they will sketch out ideas and map out what they need to bring in.

### **Learning Objectives:**

#### **Students will learn...**

- how different materials can achieve different effects
- how to choose materials for personal expression
- how to edit and compose a work of art to define a personal experience they have had with bias/injustice
- how other artists use text as art and expression

#### **Other videos that I would love to show given the time:** Art21 Exclusives

Beryle Korot "Babel: The 7 minute Scroll"

Jessica Rankin: "Mind and Language"

Mark Bradford: "Paper"

#### **Quotes/definitions to post in classroom along with essential questions covered in the unit:**

##### **Lesson 2**

"I like to play with language, word-play and puns, alliteration and onomatopoeia, poetic devices within the work...I like to pick language that has a certain kind of cadence, and words that have double meanings, or maybe words that, if you take a letter away, will be an opposite."

Trenton Doyle Hancock, artist

### Lesson 3

“I like the idea that every page in every book can have a gem on it. It’s probably what I love most about writing-that words can be used in a way that’s like a child playing in a sandpit, rearranging things, swapping them around. They’re the best moments in a day of writing-when an image appears that you didn’t know would be there when you started work in the morning.”

Marcus Zusak, author of “The Book Thief”

### Lesson 5

**Bias** -*n.* **1.** an oblique or diagonal line of direction, esp. across a woven fabric. **2.** a tendency of inclination of outlook; a subjective point of view. **3.** Statistics. a systematic distortion of a statistic as a result of sampling procedure. **4.** Electronics. a steady voltage inserted in a series with an element of an electronic device, as of a vacuum tube or transistor. **5. on the bias**, a. in the diagonal direction of the cloth. b. out of line; slanting. –adj. **6.** cut, set, folded, etc., diagonally. –adv. **7.** in a diagonal manner; obliquely; slantingly. –v.t. **8.** to cause prejudice in (a person); influence, esp. unfairly: *a tearful plea to bias the jury.*  
**-Syn.** **2.** predisposition, preconception, predilection, partiality, proclivity; bent, leaning. Bias, prejudice mean a strong inclination of the mind of a preconceived opinion about something or someone. A bias may be favorable or unfavorable: bias in favor of or against an idea. Prejudice implies a preformed judgment even more unreasoning than bias, and usually implies an unfavorable opinion: *prejudice against a race.* **8.** predispose, bend.

Questions I want to keep on hold: What would our lives be like without language/the written word? How would human evolution be different?