Writing Label Text for a Museum Portrait
Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Target Grade Level: 4–12 in English language arts, social studies, and American history classes

Objectives
After completing this lesson, students will be able to:
• Identify and analyze key components of a portrait and relate visual elements to relevant historical context and significance
• Conduct research on an individual who played a key role in American history
• Write a museum label that clearly communicates select information appropriate to a specific task
• Present information in a style appropriate to a specific audience

Portraits
Use the portraits found in the following online exhibitions:

• “A Brush with History,” http://www.npg.si.edu/cexh/brush/gallery.htm
• “Americans Now,” http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/americansnow/index.html

Materials
• National Portrait Gallery Museum Label Writing Activity at the end of this lesson plan

Lesson Procedures
Warm-Up
Ask students (individually or in small groups) to write down the definition of “label,” along with specific examples of the different kinds of labels that they have encountered. This opening exercise presents an opportunity to discuss the purposes of labels in various formats and settings.

Introduction
1. Illustrate the function of wall labels that accompany works of art displayed in a museum.
   • Show students a portrait—without the accompanying label text—from the Portrait Gallery’s online exhibition “Americans Now” (http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/americansnow/index.html)
     Note: Click on “Enlarge” near the bottom right corner of the portrait to pop out the portrait without its accompanying label text.
   • Practice “reading” this portrait with the students. Analyze the portrait by using the “Reading” Portraiture Guide for Educators (http://www.npg.si.edu/docs/reading.pdf)
• Then show the students the label text that accompanies this portrait.
• After reading the label, discuss with students how its information revises, reinforces, or expands their analysis of the portrait.

2. Examine the labels for two portraits of Pocahontas, found on the National Portrait Gallery Museum Label Writing Activity sheet.
   • Have students locate each element of the label writing formula in the two examples.
   • Emphasize that effective wall labels rely on concise writing—no more than 140 words for the narrative biographical/historical portrait/artist information—which stems from the ability to determine and distill relevant information from multiple sources.
   • Note that label texts are specific to individual portraits, not individual persons, as the differences in the label texts for these two portraits of Pocahontas demonstrate.

Activity
1. Working individually or in small groups, students will select a portrait from either “The Struggle for Justice” exhibition (http://npg.si.edu/exhibit/struggle/index.html) or “A Brush with History” exhibition (http://www.npg.si.edu/cexh/brush/gallery.htm).

2. Students will engage in the “Think, Puzzle, Explore” investigating routine with their selected portrait:
   • What do you think you know about this portrait or sitter?
   • What questions do you have about the portrait or sitter?
   • What does the portrait or sitter make you want to explore more fully?

3. To investigate these questions, students will use information culled from the portrait, written biographies, and primary sources to create a museum label.
   • Gather biographical facts from the portrait’s symbols and construct the context of the sitter’s life.
   • Use web resources and available books to research the sitter’s life and historical contributions.
   • Compare the facts gathered from the portrait with the researched facts.

4. Based on their research, students will compose items 1–3 on the Museum Label Writing Formula, found on the activity sheet at the end of this lesson plan.

5. To locate the information for items 4–7 on the Museum Label Writing Formula, students will use the Portrait Gallery’s “Collections Search,” found at http://npgportraits.si.edu/emuseumnpg/code/emuseum.asp?page=search_advanced_NPG&module=NPG&profile=NPG.
Extension Activity
Display all of the researched portraits without the students’ label texts. One individual or group at a time, have students read their completed wall label to the rest of the class. Based on the information the presenter has shared, the audience will match each label with its accompanying portrait.

Note: For famous sitters whose image is immediately recognizable, the presenters can omit the name of the sitter and share the rest of the information on the label.

Wrap-Up
Ask students to explain something they have learned about writing for a specific audience and purpose.

Target Common Core Standards

Writing
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2
Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4
Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Research
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.7
Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Presentation
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.4
Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Reading
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7
Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
National Portrait Gallery Museum Label Writing Activity

When writing labels for exhibitions at the National Portrait Gallery, curators and historians use many different resources to gather the information needed for the approximately 140-word labels.

*Museum Label Writing Formula*

1. **Sitter**’s name, life–death dates (years only)
2. **Born** <location>
3. Biographical/historical, portrait/artist information (no more than 140 words)
4. Artist’s name, life–death dates
5. Medium, date portrait was created
6. Credit line information (for example, “Gift of…”)
7. NPG accession number

**Sample Labels:**

Pocahontas, c. 1595 – 1617
*Born near present-day Richmond, Virginia*

Created during Pocahontas’’s travels in England with her husband, John Rolfe, this engraving depicts her in English garb. Through its portrayal of the Indian princess, the print suggests that the New World could be seamlessly integrated into the British empire. The inscription provides both her Native American name, Matoaka (Pocahontas was a nickname meaning “playful one”), and her Christian name, Rebecca, and identifies her father, Prince Powhatan, as the emperor of Virginia. The engraving is in *Bazilioologia: A Booke of Kings* (1618), a collection of portraits of British monarchs and notables, attesting to the admiration Pocahontas generated among her contemporaries.

Simon van de Passe, 1595–1647
Engraving, 1616
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution
NPG.73.44

Pocahontas, the Indian princess who allegedly saved the life of English colonist John Smith, survives and flourishes as an example of an early American heroine. While Smith may have embellished the story of his rescue, the importance of Pocahontas to relations between colonists and Native Americans is undisputed. Following her conversion to Christianity and marriage to Englishman John Rolfe, Pocahontas journeyed to England with her family to demonstrate the ability of new settlers and native tribes to coexist in the Virginia colony. While in England, Pocahontas sat for her portrait, which was later engraved. That print served as the basis for this later portrait. The painter included an inscription beneath his likeness, copied from the engraving, but through an error in transcription misidentifies her husband as Thomas, the name given to their son.

Unidentified artist (possibly after Simon van de Passe)
Oil on canvas, after 1616
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; transfer from the National Gallery of Art: gift of the A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, 1942
NPG.65.61