

There Be Dragons: Using Images to Inspire Creative Writing

Paintings, drawings, sketches, tattoos, and other forms of visual art capture single moments in time, but those images can also be parts of larger stories and worlds. In this lesson, students will utilize visual thinking strategies to explore science-fiction and fantasy images and then apply their observations to world- and character-building activities.

SUGGESTED GRADE RANGE:

Grades 5-8

LESSON OBJECTIVES:

Students will:

- Utilize Visual Thinking Strategies and other techniques to evaluate and interpret images
- Understand how visual art conveys meaning by exploring images and the artists who create them
- Explore the connections between images and written narratives by analyzing examples
- Identify elements in visual images that provide context for larger stories

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS:

Artistic Process:

- Presenting—Interpreting and sharing artistic work.
- Responding—Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning
- Connecting—Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context

7. Perceive and analyze artistic work.

- VA:Re7.2.5—identify and analyze cultural associations suggested by visual imagery
- Identify specific attributes in artworks that reflect a specific culture, place, or time
- VA:RE7.1.6—Identify and interpret works of art or design that reveal how people live around the world and what they value

8. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work

- VA:Re8.1.5-8 (analyzing form and structure, subject matter, mood, and use of media)

9. Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work

- VA.Re9.1.7-8

SUPPLIES:

- Paper and writing utensil
- Computer or tablet with WiFi connection

Note: You will be looking at images during this lesson. We recommend using a device with a larger screen that will allow you to examine your image in detail.



LESSON GLOSSARY:

These are the primary terms we'll explore in this lesson. Look for a Vocabulary Terms list at the start of each section, and we'll investigate and apply the definitions as we go.

Image Terms	Definition
Image	A visual representation of something: such as <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. a likeness of an object produced on a photographic material2. a picture produced on an electronic display (such as a television or computer screen)
Visual Artist	Someone who creates images for an artistic purpose
Medium	The materials that are used to create an image
Visual Cues	Information a viewer can see (e.g., colors, postures, facial expressions, etc.)
Subject	The main idea of an image or story
Mood	The atmosphere or general feeling expressed in an image
Composition	The way in which visual elements are arranged, especially in relationship to one another
Foreground	The part of the image that is closest to the viewer
Background	The part of the image that is furthest away from the viewer
Story Terms	Definition
Hero	Usually, the main character of a story
Villain	The hero's opposite; the villain is in conflict with the hero
Conflict	A serious disagreement or argument; the reason the hero and villain are at odds
Inciting Incident	An action that prompts the hero to take on the quest
Rising Action	Increasing action and conflict in the story
Midpoint	A significant moment midway through the story
Crisis	A turning point for the hero
Climax	The peak of the conflict between the hero and the villain
Falling Action	The final actions of the story; the resolution

INTRODUCTION:

Humans have used visual art to represent, document, and interpret their world for thousands of years. The earliest known human cave art, a collection of 71 stenciled handprints, animal figures, and symbols, was discovered by researchers in the Maltravieso cave in Cáceres, Spain in 1956. Created by early human Neanderthals, these images date to more than 64,000 years ago!



These Neanderthals and other early humans used natural pigments to create images on cave walls and rock faces that documented and conveyed stories about their lives.

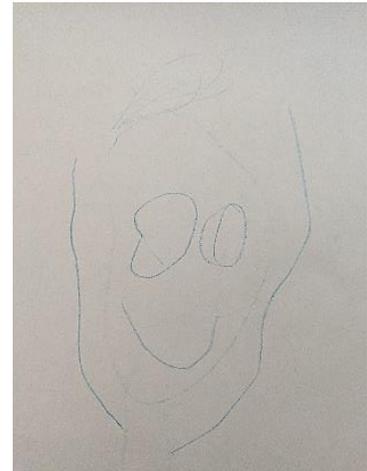
We are drawn to expressing ourselves visually. My three year-old niece loves to draw portraits of her friends and family. That's me on the right, apparently, with my "smiley face and curly hair." (Hi, friends! I'm Jessica, and I'm the Manager of Museum Education at MoPOP.)

Lesson Overview

Images represent the way we see our world and allow us to express our feelings or ideas without using words. But how do we talk about something visual, and what can we learn from images?

In this lesson, you will:

- Learn simple strategies you can use to analyze images
- Explore images from multiple artists in [MoPOP's Featured Artist Portfolio](#)
- Learn the basics of a 3-act story structure
- Investigate the connections between visual images and written stories
- Use an image to inspire your own story.



There are 3 sections in this lesson: Images, Story Structure, and Wrap-Up and Extensions. Look for summary information at the beginning of each section as well as what you'll LEARN and DO.

Each section includes an estimated time to complete, but feel free to spend as much time as you want. You may complete this lesson in a day or, for a deeper dive into your image and story, spread it out over multiple days!

SECTION 1: IMAGES

Part 1: Talking About Images

How do we talk about and interpret images? For our lesson today, we'll focus on how images use visual cues to introduce us to characters, identify settings, and tell stories. We'll help you interpret and analyze an image you choose from our artists' portfolio and then use it to inspire your own story.



Estimated Time to Complete:
15 minutes



Vocabulary Terms:

- Image
- Visual Artist
- Medium



LEARN:

What are **images**, and who creates them? An **image** is a visual representation of something. An image may be a painting, a sculpture, a comic book panel, a tattoo, or any other visual creation that represents something else.

Visual artists may be comic book artists or painters, sculptors or tattoo artists. They use different materials, known as **mediums**, to create images that express ideas, convey emotions, and tell stories. In this section, you'll explore strategies you can use to analyze and interpret visual art.



Ms. Marvel #13 (2014)

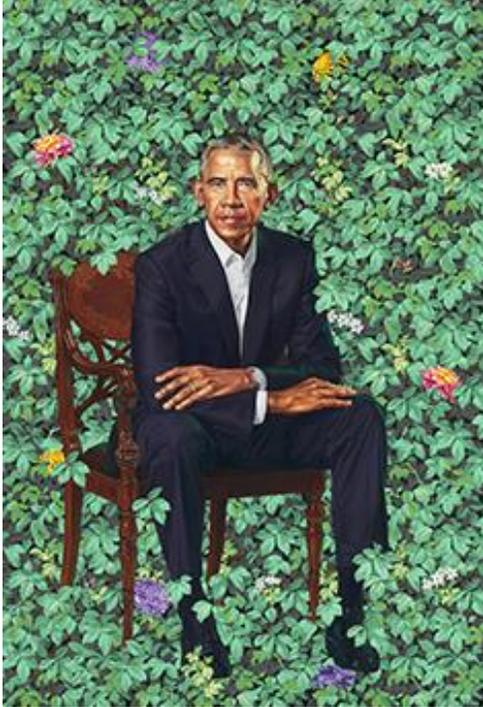
Digital and print comic book; cover art by Marguerite Sauvage, written by G. Willow Wilson



"Fearless Girl" (2017) and "Charging Bull" (1987)

Bronze sculptures by Kristen Visbal ("Fearless Girl") and Arturo Di Modica ("Charging Bull")

Photo by Jeenah Moon/Bloomberg



President Barack Obama (2018)
Oil painting by Kehinde Wiley



First Lady Michelle Obama (2018)
Oil painting by Amy Sherald



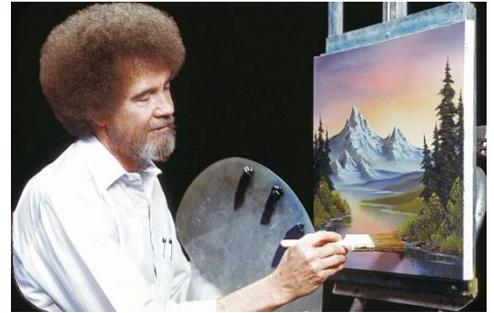
You Are Beautiful, 1st Ave., Seattle, WA (2020)
Street art by Asha Dore



DO:

Where a writer “paints” with words, visual artists “write” with images. We’re going to explore tools and strategies that you can use to read images like you read stories.

The images you’ll explore today were created by different artists with different styles and using different mediums, but they all have some basic elements in common. These artists all use **visual cues** to convey information about **characters, settings, and stories**.



But how do we talk about something that’s visual? Let’s start by looking at an example. Take a minute to study this image by one of MoPOP’s featured artists, Todd Lockwood, and then answer the questions on the next page.



Todd Lockwood
Cat's Eyes, 2004
Courtesy of Todd Lockwood

Image Worksheet



What five things do you notice first about this image?

Write down **anything you notice** as you look at the image—characters, setting, colors, actions, etc.

1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

What's happening in this image?

Who are these **characters** and what are they doing?

What do you see that makes you say that?

What **visual cues** does the artist use to help you identify what's happening?

CHARACTERS: Just like you, **characters** in images experience their surroundings with all **five senses**. Use the chart below to think about what they might see, hear, smell, touch, or taste. Visual cues may help with some of this, but you can fill in the gaps with your own imagination!

These characters...

See:	
Hear:	
Smell:	
Touch:	
Taste:	



Congratulations! You've taken the first steps to interpret and analyze an image. You'll use these questions again to help you interpret the image you'll choose from the portfolio in the next section.

Part 2: Choose and Analyze Your Image

Now it's your turn! Take some time to look through our [Featured Artist Portfolio](#) and choose an image that inspires or interests you in some way. You'll use this image for the rest of this activity.

Our portfolio features art from multiple artists and in a variety of styles. Follow the portfolio link to view the images, read our featured artists' bios, investigate their websites, and explore Q&As with several of the artists.

You may also do this lesson as many times as you'd like using different images each time.



Choose any image that speaks to you!



Estimated Time to Complete:
10 minutes



DO:

Just like we did in our *Cat's Eyes* example, start by **studying your image** and **answering the questions** on the next page. These are the same questions we just used in our example. Look for **visual cues** in your image and note any elements that stand out to you.



Now it's your turn to analyze and interpret your image! Artists create images with specific ideas in mind, but your own experiences will influence what you notice and how you interpret an image. As long as you rely on the visual cues to help you analyze your image, there are no wrong answers!

Start by looking at your image and taking notes on what stands out to you. We'll look more deeply at the characters, setting, and story in the next activities.



What five things do you notice first about this image?

Write down anything you notice as you look at the image—the characters, the setting, colors, the story, etc.

1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

What's happening in this image?

*Who are these **characters** and what are they doing?*

What do you see that makes you say that?

Look for visual cues in the image!

What else do you notice about this image?



You've already gotten a great start on interpreting your image! Artists use many techniques to convey meaning and emotion in their work. Now that you've mastered some basics, we're going to investigate additional tools you can use to interpret your image and explore the ways it may inspire your story.

SUBJECT

Images have subjects just like stories! The **subject** is the image's main idea.

COLORS

Colors may give you information about everything from how a setting feels to what a character's occupation might be. Cool colors often indicate colder climates or darker emotions while warm colors can indicate warmer settings or happier emotions.



MOOD

The **mood** refers to the atmosphere or general feeling expressed in an image. The mood in an image could be mysterious or dangerous, peaceful or calm.

COMPOSITION

The **composition** is the way in which visual elements are arranged, especially in relationship to one another. If you were describing this image to someone who couldn't see it, you would likely describe its **composition**.

FOREGROUND

The foreground is the part of the image that is closest to the viewer. These are often the elements you notice first.

BACKGROUND

This is the part of the image that is furthest away from the viewer. You may not notice these background details first, but they can convey a lot of information!



Next, you'll use these terms to help you analyze and interpret your image.

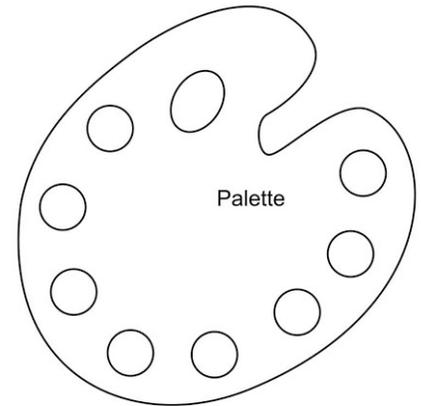


What is the subject of your image?

If someone asked you about your image, and you said “my image is about...”, you would be describing the subject.

What are the main colors in your image?

You can describe them below or use crayons, markers, or colored pencils to fill them in on the palette.



What is the mood of your image?

*Circle any words that you think describe the **mood** of your image or write in your own!*

Calm	Cheerful	Lifeless	Angry
Content	Happy	Gloomy	Dark
Peaceful	Joyful	Miserable	Distressing
Relaxed	Romantic	Sad	Frightening
Tranquil	Energetic	Dull	Scary
Other words to describe your image’s mood:			

What do you notice about the foreground of your image?

What is happening in the background of the image?

Write a description of your image’s composition.

Imagine that you are describing your image to someone who cannot see it.

Part 3: Character

Now that you've chosen an image and taken some time to study it, it's time to look closely at specific elements. Images have layers of meaning and detail that all help convey an idea or express an emotion. The more time you spend with your image, the more you're likely to notice!

First, we'll focus on the **characters** in your image. In the next sections, we'll look at the **setting** and the **story**, and then we'll put it all together to create a story inspired by your image.



Estimated Time to Complete:
20 minutes



LEARN:

For this section, we're going to focus only on the character(s) in your image. Do you recognize the characters below? Characters are one of your most important storytelling tools. They connect the reader or viewer to your story and help you explore conflicts and ideas. The more you know about your characters, the easier it will be to create a story around them.



Examine Your Character(s):

Take a moment to look at the character(s) in your image. Think about the elements that stand out to use and then use the questions on the next page to help you analyze and interpret the character(s) in your image. As you think more deeply about what you notice, you'll understand more about who your character is and what choices they might make in your story.

If your image has more than one character, decide which one represents the **main character** in the scene and answer the following questions about that character. You can repeat these questions for other characters in your image.

You can use the Character Worksheet on the next pages, type your notes, or just jot down your observations. **Take your time on these questions!** This information will help you build your character, so the more detail you can add, the better!



Character Worksheet

1. First, let's think about your main character's **physical attributes**. These are the visible things you can observe about your character just by looking at them.

➤ **How old is your character?** _____

➤ **What do you notice about your character's facial expression? How do they feel in this moment?**

➤ **Does your character have any objects (a staff, swords, jewelry, etc.)? If so, describe the object and how your character uses them.**

2. Next, let's think about your character's **mannerisms** (the way they walk, stand, or sit).

➤ **Stand up and mimic your character's pose. Walk around the room and sit down like you think your character would move. What do you notice?**

➤ **How do they sound when they talk? Are they loud or quiet? Is their voice deep or high-pitched? Do they have an accent?**

3. Now that you have a sense of how your character looks and moves, think about the things we can't see. Use your imagination and explore your character! The more you know about them, the more real they'll feel to you and your reader when you write your story.

➤ **What is your character's name?** _____

➤ **What are your character's pronouns? (She/her, he/him, they/their, etc.)**

4. The best characters are complicated! Let's think about your character's **motivations**.

- Is this **character** a **hero**, a **villain**, or a **companion**?

- What does your character want?

5. What else feels important to you about your character? Are there other important details? Write down anything else you think is important.

6. Every great character needs a great **introduction**! This is your chance to tell your reader who this person is. Think about how we would meet the character in your image and **write your character introduction** below.

- *For example, this is how author Suzanne Collins introduces Rue in The Hunger Games:*

"She's the twelve-year-old, the one who reminded me so of Prim in stature. Up close she looks about ten. She has bright, dark eyes and satiny brown skin and stands tilted up on her toes with arms slightly extended to her sides, as if ready to take wing at the slightest sound. It's impossible not to think of a bird."

Character Introduction

Click [here](#) for more examples!

Part 4: Setting/World

Your character should now feel full and developed. You understand how they move and how they might feel in this moment. Now, let's focus on the world and setting.



Estimated Time to Complete:

20 minutes



LEARN:

The **setting** is the physical location in your image. Stories usually take place in multiple locations, and the hero often returns home at the end. For this section, we'll focus on the physical setting you can observe in your image.



OBSERVE:

Take a few minutes to just observe the setting in your image. Pay attention to colors and any trees or other physical characteristics that can tell you about the place in your image.



EXAMINE YOUR IMAGE

Use the questions on the next pages to help you analyze the setting in your image. Take your time! Details help bring settings in stories to life. The more you can notice about the setting, the easier it will be to describe it to your reader.

Setting Worksheet

Unlike characters, your setting only has **physical attributes**. Your setting doesn't have feelings or emotions, but it can cause those feelings for your characters. A hot, dry setting might make your character act differently than a sunny field with a gentle stream running through it.

- **What do you notice about the setting?** Write down anything that stands out to you (rocks, trees, mountains, water, etc.).

- **How does this setting feel?** Is it hot or cold? Is there a wind? Is it wet or dry? If your setting has seasons, which season is it?

Now let's think about your character in this setting. Use your imagination to explore how your character feels about this environment!

- **Is this your character's home or have they traveled here from somewhere else?**

- **What sounds does your character hear in this setting?** Do they hear the wind in the trees or a fire crackling?

- **What does this setting smell like?**

Describe your setting! *The setting is like another character in your story. Use details to help your reader imagine the setting.*

➤ *For example, this is how J.R.R. Tolkien opens his 1937 novel, The Hobbit:*

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.”

Setting Description



SECTION 2: STORY

Part 1: The Three-Act Story

Just like a written narrative, images tell a story. They capture a single moment but also give us clues that allow us to imagine (or remember) the rest of the story.

Before we can learn how images represent parts of stories, we need to learn some storytelling basics. We'll use a simple three-act story structure that you can use to analyze stories or write your own.



Estimated Time to Complete:
20 minutes



Vocabulary Terms:

- Act 1: The Setup
 - Hero
 - Villain
 - Conflict
 - Inciting Incident
- Act 2: The Confrontation
 - Rising Action
 - Midpoint
- Act 3: Resolution
 - Crisis
 - Climax
 - Failing Action



LEARN:

Humans have been writing stories for thousands of years. The oldest known written story is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, an epic poem loosely based on the historical King Gilgamesh who ruled Sumerian Uruk (modern-day Iraq). Surviving fragments of this story have been dated to sometime around 2000 BC!

Since then, people have been using written forms to tell stories and talk about social issues. We are going to investigate a simple **three-act** story structure. We'll look at each Act in more detail on the next pages.

- **Act 1: Setup**—introduce the main characters and their conflict
- **Act 2: Confrontation**—your characters face challenges and meet new companions
- **Act 3: Resolution**—your characters meet in an epic climax and your hero emerges with new strengths and skills

Act 1: Setup...Who are these people, anyway?

Set the stage in Act 1! Introduce your reader to your **hero** (usually the “good” character), the **villain** (usually the “bad” character), and the **conflict** between them. Your hero should also face an **inciting incident**—something that starts them on their journey.

- *Act 1 is usually about the first quarter of a story.*

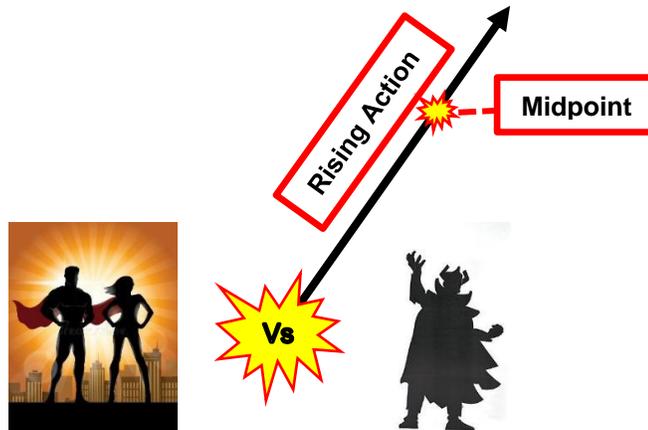


Act 1: The Setup

Act 2: Confrontation...Things are getting complicated!

The tension builds during Act 2! Your hero sets off on their journey but meets challenges along the way. This is known as the **rising action**. You can also introduce other characters and expand on the conflict of the story. This Act also includes the **midpoint** of your story. As the name implies, this is the middle of the story, and your characters should face a significant challenge or event that puts their entire quest at risk.

- *Act 2 is usually the longest section and should be about half of your story.*



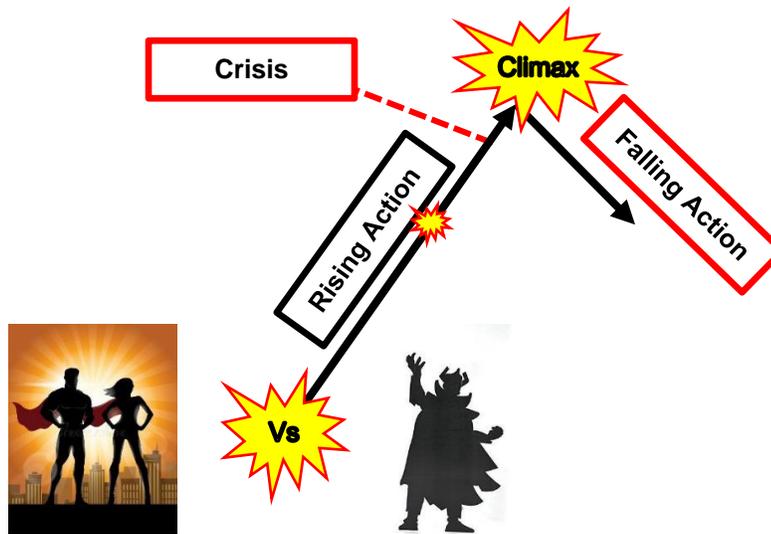
Act 2: The Confrontation

Act 3: Resolution...Gasp! It's the climax of your story!

This is the end of your story, the peak of the action! As they near the climax, your hero faces a **crisis**. They may be temporarily defeated or learn important information that makes them question their actions and goals.

After the crisis, the hero and the villain face off in the **climax**, the epic battle that resolves their conflict. The final pages of your story are the **falling action**. This is where you wrap up any loose ends and celebrate your hero's victory.

- The final act is usually about a quarter of your story.



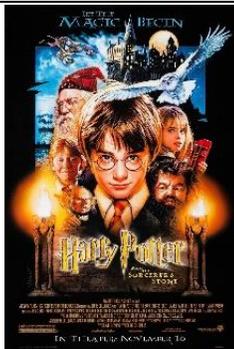
Act 3: Resolution



Do you recognize it?

You can find the three-act story in many modern stories and films. Look at the examples below, all of which are from popular films that follow the three-act structure. We've chosen example images that correspond to key elements of the three-act structure.

- Think about these stories. Can you identify all three acts in any of them?



Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (2001)
Directed by Chris Columbus



Act 1, Setup
The hero (Harry) meets the villain (Professor Quirrell, who is Voldemort in disguise!).



Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back (1980)
Directed by George Lucas



Act 3, Resolution

At the **climax**, the hero (Luke) recognizes that the villain (Darth Vader) is actually his father.



Wonder Woman (2017)
Directed by Patty Jenkins



Act 2, Confrontation

At the **midpoint**, the hero (Wonder Woman) reveals herself and crosses the battlefield.



Black Panther (2018)
Directed by Ryan Coogler



Act 1, Setup

The hero (T'Challa) meets the villain (Killmonger).



The Hunger Games (2012)
Directed by Gary Ross



Act 3, Resolution

The hero (Katniss), faces a **crisis** when she is unable to protect her friend (Rue).



So how do we connect story structure to images? The image you chose from the portfolio represents a single moment, just like the film examples. If you have seen those films or know the stories they're based on, you might recognize the scenes and know where they happen.

But what if you don't know the story? Just like you learned as you analyzed your image, you have to rely on visual cues. Harry Potter meeting Professor Quirrell looks very different from Wonder Woman on the battlefield. Even if you don't know those stories, the visual cues in the images help you identify them as very different parts of their stories.



DO:

Now it's your turn to pair a story passage with an image! Read the excerpt below from Madeleine L'Engle's 1962 novel *A Wrinkle in Time* and then study the images on the next page. All three images are based on this excerpt, but they all interpret it in different ways. Which one do you think best reflects the text?

Below them the town was laid out in harsh angular patterns. The houses in the outskirts were all exactly alike, small square boxes painted gray. Each had a small, rectangular plot of lawn in front, with a straight line of dull-looking flowers edging the path to the door. Meg had a feeling that if she could count the flowers there would be exactly the same number for each house. In front of all the houses children were playing. Some were skipping rope, some were bouncing balls. Meg felt vaguely that something was wrong with their play. It seemed exactly like children playing around any housing development at home, and yet there was something different about it. She looked at Calvin, and saw that he, too, was puzzled.

"Look!" Charles Wallace said suddenly. "They're skipping and bouncing in rhythm! Everyone's doing it at exactly the same moment."

This was so. As the skipping rope hit the pavement, so did the ball. As the rope curved over the head of the jumping child, the child with the ball caught the ball. Down came the ropes. Down came the balls. Over and over again. Up. Down. All in rhythm. All identical. Like the houses. Like the paths. Like the flowers.

Then the doors of all the houses opened simultaneously, and out came women like a row of paper dolls. The print of their dresses was different, but they all gave the appearance of being the same. Each woman stood on the steps of her house. Each clapped. Each child with the ball caught the ball. Each child with the skipping rope folded the rope.



The three images below are all based on the passage from *A Wrinkle in Time* that you just read, and they all interpret the scene differently.

➤ Which one do you think best reflects the passage?



A Wrinkle in Time (2017)
San Diego Comic-Con Stunt



A Wrinkle in Time (2012)
Graphic novel, adapted and illustrated by Hope Larson



A Wrinkle in Time (2018)
Film, directed by Ava DuVernay

Part 2: Identify Your Image's Story

You've had a chance to explore the character and the setting in your image, and you've learned about the basic three-act story structure. Now let's think about what point of the story your image represents. Is this the introduction? The climax? Is someone else in this scene, just out of view?



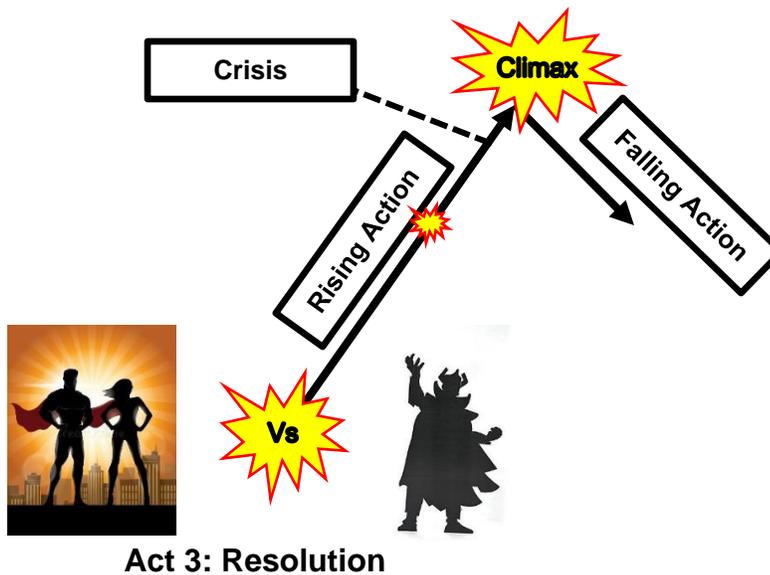
Estimated Time to Complete:

15 minutes



LEARN

We've already talked about the three-act story. As a reminder, here's our three-act diagram. Your image captures a single moment in this model, and you can combine visual cues with your imagination to decide what's happening!



By now, you should already know who the characters are in your image, and you've had a chance to explore the setting. Let's put all of those pieces together and identify this moment in your story.



EXAMINE YOUR IMAGE:

Where are we in your story? You don't have to have the whole plot figured out, but you can decide where this single image fits for your character and your story.

As a reminder, here are the stages we discussed earlier:

- **Act 1: Setup**—introduce the main characters and their conflict; the hero faces an **inciting incident** that prompts them to begin their journey
- **Act 2: Confrontation**—your characters face challenges and meet new companions; a major event happens at the **midpoint**
- **Act 3: Resolution**—your hero faces a **crisis** before they meet the villain meet in an epic climax; your hero emerges with new strengths and skills



Which act is this image from? What moment does your image capture?

Describe what's happening in this scene.

You can copy what you've already written or expand it here.

Part 3: Finish the story!

You've now identified the character in your image, you've explored the setting, and you know what moment your image depicts. Now it's your turn to fill in the rest of the story!



Estimated Time to Complete:

15 minutes



LEARN:

It's time to put all the pieces together! You'll combine Aristotle's story structure with everything you've observed, analyzed, and interpreted about your image to create a full outline for your story.



DO:

Use the chart on the next page to complete an outline for your story. This will serve as a rough guide to your story. Once you have an idea of how the pieces all fit together, start writing your own story inspired by your image!

ACT 1: Setup	The hero:	
	Meets the villain:	
	In (setting):	
	The villain wants:	
	But the hero wants:	
ACT 2: Confrontation:	They arrive in a new setting:	
	The hero tries to:	
	But the villain:	
	Then the hero tries:	
	But the villain:	
ACT 3: Resolution	Victory is at hand!	
	But the hero learns:	
	Which causes them:	
	The villain:	
	And then:	
	The hero loses:	

SECTION 3: Wrap Up and Challenge Extensions

Congratulations! You have learned strategies you can use to analyze and interpret a piece of visual art. You understand a basic story structure model, and you've had a chance to combine your image analysis with a story structure.

Visual art can tell us a lot about historic times, but it can also help us imagine our future or explore fantastic worlds. Works of art often inspire each other. That's why books usually have an image on the cover to help us imagine what happens inside! What you see and imagine may not be what actually happens, but it can still inspire your imagination and help you create your own characters and stories.



Next Steps and Extensions:

- Complete your story and submit it to MoPOP's [Write Out of This World](#) short story competition.
- Bring your story full circle! Create a NEW work of art inspired by your project. You could draw another scene from your story, create a collage, design your character's costume, take a photo, or make a sculpture. Use whatever **medium** inspires you.
- Collaborate with a friend. Your story could become a comic book, a short film, a play, or an exhibit with photos and props. Work together to create an even bigger version of your project!
- Explore story-starter templates and more on MoPOP's [Online Educational Resources](#) page!
- Create an image that represents a moment from your favorite story or film. Ask your friends or family members to analyze the image.