

Ekphrasis: Descriptive Writing Practice

By James Leary

This activity works best in a composition class that is currently engaged in working with narrative writing styles. I personally use it for segments on literacy and personal narratives.

Materials

- You will need an image or a set of images. These can be presented to students via an overhead projector or hardcopy, but I find the practice to be more successful when students can hold and pass around a picture. Not all students need to be working with the same image, but having several students per image is useful; students will be able to compare their own descriptions to those of others. Images that have detailed content work best. (A good source for me in the past has always been photographs from *National Geographic*.)
- An overhead projector
- Examples of ekphrasis to serve as models

Guidelines and Purpose

One of the difficulties that students in my composition classes often face when engaging narrative writing tasks is the necessary scope of descriptive details. A common approach is to provide models of the narrative for students; however, I find that the models are more useful if they are paired with specific descriptive writing practice. Therefore, this exercise uses a genre of writing that students have often not encountered to improve their approach to descriptive writing: ekphrasis.

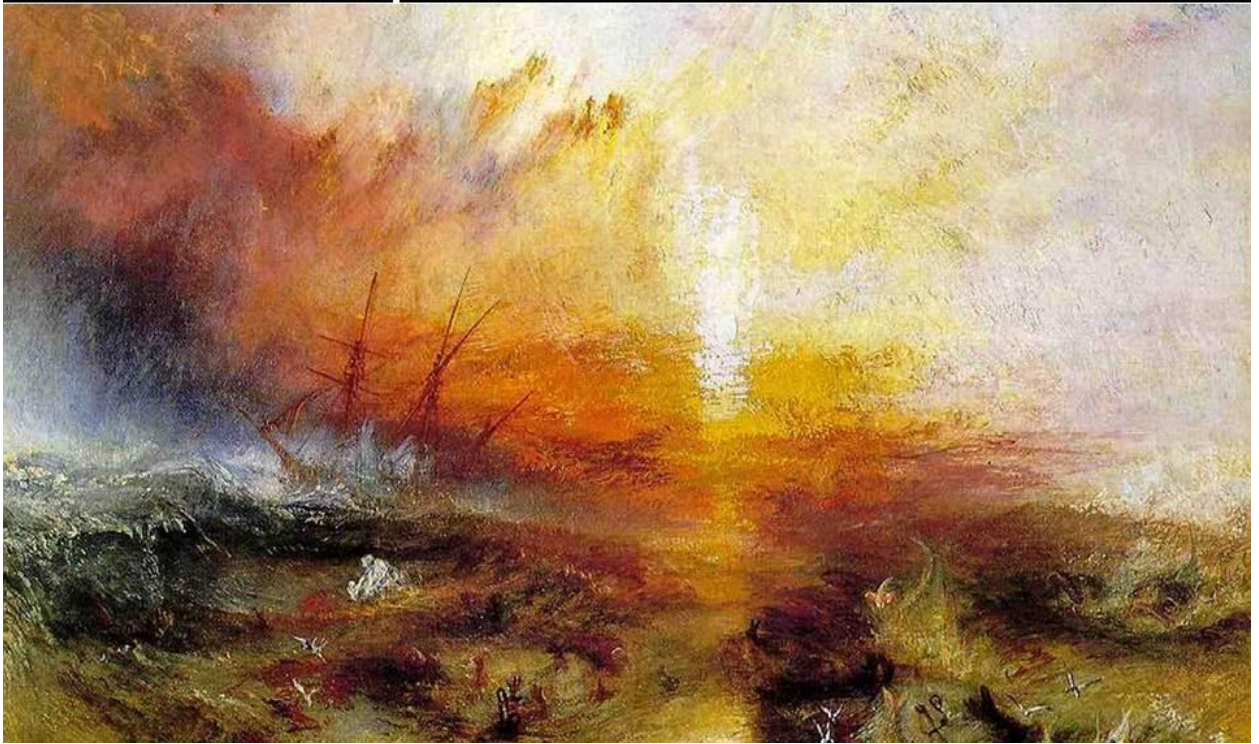
Since the purpose of ekphrasis is to recreate an image via language, the genre pairs well writing styles or tasks that require close attention to descriptive detail. A secondary purpose of ekphrasis requires writers to allude to what they see as the essence behind the image. If more class time is available, this route can be pursued to address writing descriptive passages to elicit specific meanings or interpretations.

The Steps in Brief:

- Provide a history of the genre and examples. (See references below for source material.) You can have images or slides on the overhead projector while you read examples in order to provide an immediate image reference. (See example slide top of next page.)

J.M.W. Turner's *Slave Ship*, 1840

It is a sunset on the Atlantic after prolonged storm; but the storm is partially lulled, and the torn and streaming rain clouds are moving in scarlet lines to lose themselves in the hollow of the night. –John Ruskin, 1843



- Give students the opportunity to comment on how accurate they perceive the ekphrasis examples to be. Ask them to comment on diction, style, and structure, and invite any additional comments.
- Divide students into pairs or have them work individually.
- Give each student or pair an image. Ask them to model ekphrasis and describe the image. (200 words is my recommended passage length. This often takes 20-40 minutes to complete.)
- Once the passages are complete, have them exchange the written descriptions with other students. Reveal the pictures *after* reading passages. Give students a few minutes to chat and discuss their successes and difficulties with the task. (This will usually happen anyway while they are touring the writing output.)
- Discuss with students how this might be applied to the narrative assignments from the course. Recommend that they modify the technique in the following way: visualize scenes from your narrative in your mind before writing them and utilize some of the ekphrastic techniques to improve the visual components of your work.

Final Thoughts

Overall, this lesson seems to delight many students. Some will become frustrated at being asked to describe an image they may see as boring or uneventful. (Your image selection can influence this, of course.) However, with a little encouragement, nearly all the students in my 101 and 102 composition classes have completed successful ekphrastic descriptions. I often collect these online in a central location to allow access while students are drafting narratives; they will frequently use them as models.

Perhaps the largest challenge with this assignment stems from literary culture; the ekphrasis, in the most traditional forms, does not appear that often in contemporary society. Most of the standard examples are from the nineteenth century and earlier, and as a result emphasizing relevance can be difficult. I will often conclude class with a discussion about how the genre might have changed or where students might see similar styles today. If time is available, instructors might also consider discussing links to travel narratives, tourism advertisements, information panels in museums, and modern reviews of video games and films.

Some Suggested Sources

Popular examples: (Early) Plato's forms, the description of the shield of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*, engravings on the Temple of Juno in Virgil's *Aeneid*, (More recent) "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by John Keats, John Ruskin's description of J.M.W. Turner's *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On*, and William Thackeray's ekphrasis of the same painting.

Scholarly Treatments: Though many of these exist, two that are readily available on the web and suitable for this exercise are:

- 1.) Ryan Welsh's approach to defining the genre:
<http://humanities.uchicago.edu/faculty/mitchell/glossary2004/ekphrasis.htm>
- 2.) Marjorie Munsterberg's detailed essay with many of the examples suggested above:
<http://www.writingaboutart.org/pages/ekphrasis.html>