



Collections Exercise – Description and Interpretation

This exercise asks students to be creative and expansive in their encounter with collections, building their research skills by moving them away from the impulse to categorize and define. It should also challenge students to identify the interrelationship between description and interpretation, and to be aware of themselves as both receivers and producers of knowledge.

This exercise can further help instructors assess the prior knowledge of their students at the start of the semester, or to evaluate student learning later on in the course. It may also assist students in selecting a topic or direction of inquiry for their course assignments.

Activity

Looking at the item, make a list of as many descriptive terms as you can. These terms can include questions of description (e.g. if there is a material present that you cannot identify, or information you cannot access without lifting the item, weighing it, smelling it, tasting it, etc.).

- Take care always to maintain accuracy over precision (e.g. if you are certain there is stone present, but are not certain what kind of stone it is, note “stone,” and raise type as a question).

When it begins to be difficult to keep describing, push through and find more, no matter how seemingly trivial. Make sure your list has at least 10 descriptive terms before you finish.

Return to the item and take it in as a whole.

Return to your list. Circle the three descriptions that encapsulate the item to you the most.

Looking again at the item, what would you like to know about it? Make a list of as many interpretive questions as you can. Again, when you find yourself running out of questions, keep asking and find more. Make sure to have at least 10.

Return to the item and take it in as a whole.

Return to your list. Circle the three questions that are the most important or interesting to you to pursue.

Share your observations and questions with your classmates.

Class discussion

Share what information you have on the item from the Museum catalogue, along with any other further information you may have to share. This information does not need to be extensive. You may choose here to tie the item, and/or this exercise, into the themes of the class or a recent class lecture. You may also choose this as an opportunity for further student reflection by drawing student questions into conversation with the information you have just provided and seeing how they compare, what new insights emerge, or new inquiries.

Suggested discussion questions

- *In the description portion of the exercise, how often did students need to ask rather than state? How often can students in the class answer one another's questions? Do they share in what they know and don't know?*
- *Can students always differentiate between their descriptive and their interpretive observations or questions? Have them mark their lists, wherever they feel uncertain.*
- *Can students connect their descriptive and interpretive questions? (i.e. if they knew the descriptor, would that provide direction for the interpretation?)*
- *Can students connect their interpretive questions? Do they seem to build on one another? (e.g. in asking one question, did they find themselves asking another? Did the questions inspire one another?)*
- *If student questions did inspire one another, do they seem to go "forward" from one another (e.g. "if x, then what about y?") or "backward" (e.g. in asking one question, did they find a gap in their knowledge somewhere else, that they found had to be addressed before they could turn to the original question)?*
- *How would students go about answering the questions they selected to pursue? Where could they go to learn more? What knowledge, or kinds of knowledge, would they need to seek? What kinds of authorities?*