Inspired English comprises a series of projects which explore the English curriculum using sensational works of art as inspiration. Based on popular workshops developed by the National Gallery of Victoria, each project centres on a particular writing focus and context, enabling teachers to use them to support any existing English program. Inspired English is a rich, unique way of engaging students with cultural, historical and social issues while integrating literacy, literature and language skills.

Inspired English Student Book 1 is a practical workbook that enables students to record vocabulary, critical analysis and creative ideas, all of which feed into a broad range of creative opportunities. Complete with high-quality reproductions of each work of art, these workbooks are an invaluable springboard for:

- critical thinking
- visual literacy
- creative writing
- literary techniques
- close reading
- vocabulary development.

Book 1 includes projects on:

- descriptive writing (John Brack’s Collins St, 5p.m.)
- the language of popular culture (Howard Arkley’s Explosion)
- short forms of poetry (Kim Hoa Tram’s Pine with cranes dancing in the snow, dance in motion)
- the art of storytelling (Rosemary Lang’s groundspeed (red piazza) #2)
- writing about identity (Andy Warhol’s Self-portrait no. 9 and Julie Dowling’s Federation series, 1901–2001).

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INSPIRED ENGLISH 1

Creative writing and critical thinking through art

Susie May and Purnima Ruanglertbutr
Consultant: Emma Heyde
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Introduction

As authors of *Inspired English* we would like to tell you a bit about ourselves and why we recommend this book to you.

We are passionate about teaching English through art and for many years we have been lucky enough to work with students of English like yourselves, in our role as teachers at the National Gallery of Victoria. Our aim is to inspire you to think, analyse and write creatively by describing and discussing visual images.

So what can you learn about English through working with art? First, so much of what we learn today comes through images and it is more important than ever to be able to know how to analyse these images in a critical way, just as you do with written texts. Secondly, most of us have experienced a time when we’ve had ‘writer’s block’ and can’t think of how to describe something or what theme to write about, and art can provide strong visual images and interesting details that will enrich your descriptive writing. Art can also be a great source of ideas for writing because it explores everything from intriguing and mysterious stories from ancient times and cultures to themes inspired by popular culture or the challenges facing the world today.

We have been so inspired by the incredible ideas, creative interpretations and imaginative writing by students taking part in workshops in the Gallery that we decided to create the *Inspired English* books. They will allow you to experience the same exciting and stimulating experience in your classroom using works of art in our collection.

If you are at all worried about the fact that you might not know anything about art, it doesn’t matter in the least. You don’t have to! All you need is curiosity and the ability to look closely at images. Art is a great communicator and like literature it can bring history or stories alive and express human emotions and ideas. So just think of art as another form of text, except that in this case you are ‘reading’ the colours and images instead of words.

In this book we have chosen six very different works of art from different times and cultures to inspire you. In each of the projects, you and your classmates will have the opportunity to explore your own ideas about what each work might mean in a class discussion. It will be fascinating to discover how we all interpret art differently. There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answer as long as you can point out elements in the works of art to support your opinion. Guided by your own personal imagination, be confident in your interpretations and as you share ideas as a class, you will be amazed at what you can learn from listening to your classmates’ opinions.

Stimulated by the works of art, you will find yourselves writing confidently in all sorts of different text types from diaries, letters, fables to interesting forms of poetry, funky menus, advertisements and celebrity feature articles.

Learn about English and Art at the same time and amaze your teachers with your inspiring ideas and writing.

Have fun!

Susie May and Purnima Ruanglertbutr
PROJECT 1

Descriptive writing

WORK OF ART 1: Collins St, 5p.m., John Brack, 1955

In this project we are going to use Collins St, 5p.m., by John Brack to learn about and inspire descriptive writing. You will:

- build your vocabulary
- learn how to use synonyms, nouns, adjectives and adverbs
- use imagery in your writing, including alliteration, simile, metaphor and onomatopoeia.

At the end of the project, you’ll have the opportunity to apply your new skills to a creative piece, which could be anything from a poem to an interview or article.
1 Introduction to descriptive writing

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this section, you will:
- get an introduction to descriptive writing
- learn to ‘read’ visual texts
- develop colourful vocabulary for describing things.

Descriptive writing involves painting a picture with words. By paying close attention to detail and describing things, people, places and objects with words that draw upon all five senses, you can create powerful images in the mind of your reader. Literary texts use all kinds of devices to achieve this, which we will learn about in this project. Visual texts also use specific techniques to communicate ideas, and the process of ‘reading’ images will help you come up with strong descriptive words that you can use in your own writing.

ACTIVITY 1.1 What is descriptive writing?

Consider the following questions to start thinking about descriptive writing. Record your ideas here so that you can refer back to them when you’re creating your own writing. Your teacher may ask you to share your responses with the class—write down any ideas that your classmates suggest that you find interesting.

a What are some types of descriptive writing?

b For what purposes do you think writers use descriptive writing?

c What are some features of descriptive writing?

d Where have you found examples of descriptive writing?

e Have you ever written a piece of descriptive writing? If so, what was its purpose?
Looking closely: a focus on visual details

We are usually all so busy and moving so fast that we only get quick glances of the things around us. For example, how much detail do you notice when a bird flies overhead, or when people rush past us on a busy train station platform? Imagine what we would see if we stopped to really look closely. What stories would unfold from the unseen details? Would our views on what we’d seen change?

We are going to look closely at Collins St, 5p.m. to unravel the story behind the painting. To help you describe to others what you see, you will need to use some specific parts of speech that writers use in creating descriptions.

**Adjectives** are words used to describe things. For example, a star could be described as bright, distant or sparkly. Adjectives describe **nouns** (naming words that identify people, places, objects, feelings, groups—you name it!).

**Adverbs** are used to modify **verbs**. They make verbs more specific—which enables writers to convey descriptions of actions and events in more detail. Remember, verbs are words used to describe actions. You cannot have a sentence without a verb (for example, to walk, to sing, to throw).

### ACTIVITY 1.2 Look closely

Study the image of Collins St, 5p.m.

a Look at the painting for 30 seconds without writing anything down and then look away. What details can you remember about the image? In the left column of the table below, write a list of nouns and verbs that identify items and actions featured in the image.

b Now look closely at the painting again, this time for five minutes. In the right column, list **adjectives** that describe the nouns and **adverbs** that describe the verbs you listed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nouns and verbs</th>
<th>Adjectives and adverbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>faces</td>
<td>serious, glum</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Rounding up

Reading a visual text like this painting can help you come up with a more descriptive vocabulary. Developing your skills in looking closely will help you interpret images, inspire ideas and generate colourful words and phrases. Building a record of adjectives and adverbs that you can choose from when you are writing a creative piece will help you make your writing imaginative and more interesting for the reader.
Close reading and creative thinking

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this section, you will:

- improve your ability to ‘read’ visual texts and describe what you see
- consider the historical and social contexts of texts
- think about the techniques the artist uses to communicate ideas.

When you view a piece of art, your interpretation of it is influenced by many different things such as your life experiences, your culture and even your personality. It is highly likely that your closest friend will see something different than you see in the painting, and this is one of the great things about art! There is no right or wrong answer when it comes to your reactions, as long as you can support your answer with evidence from the painting. Discussing art with other people will give you different perspectives and insights that you might not have considered.

We are going to look at the impressions that this painting conveys to you, and why the artist may have painted it. Record your thoughts and ideas here, and refer back to them when you come to write a creative piece inspired by Collins St, 5p.m.

ACTIVITY 2.1 Impressions of Collins St, 5p.m.

Consider the following questions and record your thoughts in the graphic organisers below.

a. What are your first impressions of the painting? What thoughts or words come immediately to mind? Be sure to include some adjectives and adverbs.
b. What does the painting make you think or wonder about?


c. We call the emotional atmosphere of the text ‘mood’. What mood or moods are conveyed? What do you see that makes you think this? What emotions do you associate with these moods?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moods that are conveyed</th>
<th>What do you see that suggests this mood?</th>
<th>What emotions do you associate with the mood?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
d  What clues do you see in the painting that tell you what actions might be happening in the scene?

Clue 1:  
Clue 2:  
Clue 3:  

What might be happening in the painting?

Clue 4:  
Clue 5:  
Clue 6:  


e  What clues are there that suggest the time of day and season the artist has depicted?

Time of day and season?

Clue  
Clue  
Clue
Then and now

The time and place in which an artist creates their image influences not only how it looks but the messages and ideas it conveys. This is the historical and social context, and it is an important part of interpreting a text. You have probably already noticed that Collins St, 5p.m. shows a very different time to the one we live in. Or does it also show similarities to the time we live in?

**ACTIVITY 2.2 City life**

a. Find an image of a modern busy city. Compare it with Collins St, 5p.m. List all the aspects of city life that are the same today and all the things that are different in the Venn diagram below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collins St, 5p.m., Melbourne</th>
<th>Same</th>
<th>A city today</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

b. In what ways does the painting remind you of something in your life?

c. What aspects of the picture do you find puzzling?

d. What questions would you like to ask the artist if he was in the classroom?

e. How many aspects of the painting can you find that are ‘unrealistic’, in your opinion?
Inspired English 1

Homework task: **unrealistic images**

Why might the artist John Brack have used exaggeration and ‘unrealistic’ looking images in his painting? Write a paragraph explaining what you think the artist is trying to communicate about people who lived in Melbourne (or in any busy city) in 1955.

---

**Rounding up**

Art is a medium that can communicate historical, social and psychological ideas through a single image. Use your new analytical skills to feel confident in expressing your interpretation, and to appreciate and respect the different opinions other people might have. Our own personal experience influences what we see, and there is no right or wrong answer when it comes to appreciating a work of art.

---

3. **Building vocabulary**

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

In this section, you will:

- work with words that describe feelings and emotions
- explore descriptive devices used in both poetry and art
- continue to develop your descriptive language skills.

We use our five senses of touch, smell, taste, sight and hearing to interpret the world around us. In descriptive writing we can employ these senses to communicate ideas imaginatively, using what we call ‘sensory language’. This way we really can paint a picture using words!

Along with nouns, adjectives and verbs, writers use synonyms and adverbs to help them describe a scene. A synonym is a word that means the same as another word. Using synonyms ensures that your writing won’t be repetitive—it’ll be more interesting! For example, instead of saying ‘nice’, you could say ‘pleasant’, ‘delightful’ or ‘agreeable’. An adverb modifies the meaning of a verb to tell us how, when or where something is happening (for example, to sing **loudly**).
ACTIVITY 3.1 Sensory language

Find an interesting image and then make a list of things you might hear, see, smell, taste and touch if you ‘stepped inside’ it.

ACTIVITY 3.2 Be specific

Read the poem, ‘Be specific’, and answer the questions that follow.

a Underline words where the poet has used language that appeals to the senses of sight, hearing and smell.

b Can you identify an example of the following parts of speech?

Noun:
Noun:
Adjective:
Adjective:
Verb:
Verb:
Adverb:
Adverb:

Be specific

Don’t say you saw a bird: you saw a swallow, or a great horned owl, a hawk, or oriole.
Don’t just tell me that he flew; That’s what any bird can do;
Say he darted, circled, swooped or lifted in the blue.
Don’t say the sky behind the bird was pretty; It was watermelon pink streaked through with gold;
Gold bubbled like a fountain From a pepperminted mountain
And shone like Persian rugs when they are old.
Don’t tell me that the air was sweet with fragrance; Say it smelled of minted grass and lilac bloom;
Don’t say your heart was swinging; Name the tune that it was singing,
And how the moonlight’s neon filled the room.
Don’t say the evening creatures all were playing; Mention tree toad’s twanging, screeching fiddle notes,
Picture cricket’s constant strumming To the mass mosquitoes humming
While the frogs are singing bass deep in their throats.
Don’t use a word that’s good for all the senses There’s a word for every feeling one can feel.
If you want your lines to be terrific; Then do make your words specific,
For words can paint a picture that’s real.

Mauree Applegate
ACTIVITY 3.3 Build your vocabulary

This activity will increase the number of descriptive words you have at your disposal when talking about Collins St, 5p.m.

a Complete the table with a number of synonyms for each word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Synonyms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>black</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gang</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>depressed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trudging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clothes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faces</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discuss your ideas with a partner. Did they list any synonyms that you find interesting? If so, add these synonyms to your table. You can refer back to them when you are writing a creative piece and need some new words.

b Choose verbs, nouns, collective nouns, adjectives and adverbs from the list below to complete the paragraph about the painting. You do not need to use all of the words provided. Look these words up in a dictionary if you need to.

John Brack’s Collins St, 5p.m. is considered to be both an iconic ____________ of peak-hour Melbourne and a ______________ commentary on ______________ life in the 1950s. The bleak ____________ of ____________ browns suggests a mood of _____________. A ____________ of office workers are depicted ____________ homewards. They seem ____________ in a ____________ daily routine from which they cannot ____________.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>picture</th>
<th>melancholy</th>
<th>ironic</th>
<th>depiction</th>
<th>locked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>social</td>
<td>jaded</td>
<td>city</td>
<td>palette</td>
<td>gloomily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>urban</td>
<td>rigid</td>
<td>amusing</td>
<td>dreaminess</td>
<td>escape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shades</td>
<td>colours</td>
<td>depression</td>
<td>stringent</td>
<td>sluggishly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weary</td>
<td>mass</td>
<td>painting</td>
<td>break out</td>
<td>murky</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Describing people

ACTIVITY 3.4 Adding descriptions

a The following sentence, based on a person in the painting, is an example of a ‘bald’ sentence. This means it has no extra detail. Improve it by adding descriptions, using appropriate nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs.

The woman stares ahead.
b Choose a person in the painting *Collins St, 5p.m.* and write a detailed description of them on a separate piece of paper. Imagine that you are trying to get someone else to guess who you are describing.

**Rounding up**

Appreciate the value of expressing the things you hear, see and feel to create vivid imagery in your descriptive writing. Make use of the parts of speech used in descriptive language: adjectives, adverbs, nouns and verbs, and expand your vocabulary by using synonyms to make your writing more interesting.

**Homework task: synonyms**

Complete the following paragraph using the words at the bottom of this box. Each word can only be used once.

On a ____________________ evening in the ________________ of Melbourne, people have ____________________ work for the day. It is ____________________ -faced office- ____________________ past the ____________________ brown ________________ of the office buildings they have just ____________________ . They in the same ________________ along ________________ . They huddle together looking ________________ but yet ________________ . The Bank of New South Wales over them menacingly. They appear ________________ and thoughtless, yet calm and ________________ . Their eyes are ________________ attached to their ________________ . The ________________ calls could be coming from ________________ , trams and buses. They flock towards the calling like ________________ . They don’t turn or look ________________ . They are ________________ of their surroundings and ________________ , perhaps too ________________ by their 9-to-5 jobs. The crowd in the ________________ is ________________ and nameless. The ________________ colours suggest that all the workers are ________________ of one another, lacking ________________ .

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>screeching</th>
<th>carbon copies</th>
<th>co-workers</th>
<th>entrapped</th>
<th>alone</th>
<th>back</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>individuality</td>
<td>trains</td>
<td>facades</td>
<td>faceless</td>
<td>collected</td>
<td>oblivious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>background</td>
<td>5pm</td>
<td>destination</td>
<td>distressed</td>
<td>towers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>winter</td>
<td>grim</td>
<td>escaped</td>
<td>march</td>
<td>dreary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>city</td>
<td>workers</td>
<td>drab</td>
<td>direction</td>
<td>firmly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>finished</td>
<td>miserable</td>
<td>trudge</td>
<td>united</td>
<td>magnets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this section, you will:

→ use the ‘word string’ approach to develop your vocabulary
→ learn about collective nouns, metaphors and similes
→ write your own poetry

Consider this suggestion by the famous poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

\[
\text{prose} = \text{words in their best order} \\
\text{poetry} = \text{the best words in the best order.}
\]

Let’s use our vocabulary skills to write some descriptive poetry about Collins St, 5 p.m.

There are many different ways to describe things, from the words we select to the way we string them together. Working collaboratively with others can help us elaborate—provide more information—to create vivid descriptions, and we can then choose the way we put words together to best communicate our ideas. Poetry is a perfect example of where writers are particularly careful about not only the words they choose but the order in which they appear.

ACTIVITY 4.1 Collins St, 5 p.m. as poetry

a Write a phrase of no more than four words that describes a thought or observation about the painting.

b Take turns to share your phrase with the class. Then select the phrases you like best. Sort them into lines 1 to 5 to create a poem. Write down your class poem here:

Title:

Line 1

Line 2

Line 3

Line 4

Line 5

Notice how your class poem uses very few words but paints a vivid picture? Careful word selection is the key to writing poetry. Writing poetry collaboratively with your friends can produce some very interesting work.

Did you also notice that your poem doesn’t have to rhyme?
Collective nouns

How many times have you used the words ‘a lot of …’? Wouldn’t it be less tedious to use something else sometimes? Collective nouns give us interesting ways to describe more than one of something. For example:

- a huddle of walruses
- a parliament of owls
- a hush of librarians
- a pride of lions.

Do you know any others? Have fun looking some up online. Most of them make sense, others are very unexpected. (You’ve heard of a band of robbers, but what about a babble of barbers?)

ACTIVITY 4.2 Creating collective nouns

Look at the painting. Which items or features are shown in multiples, rather than singly? List six items and create an imaginative collective noun for each in the chart below. Refer back to this table when you come to write your own creative work to help make your descriptions more interesting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Collective noun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</table>

Writing with colour

Creative writers don’t always say exactly what they mean. They use literary devices to create interest and to help them convey multiple messages or possible interpretations. These devices add colour and interest. Two techniques writers use are simile and metaphor—they are similar but not the same, so make sure you understand the difference.

A simile compares two things that have similar characteristics, even though they may not be immediately obvious. Similes often include words that create comparisons, including ‘like’ and ‘as’. For example: The moon was like a big shiny button.

A metaphor compares things that have characteristics in common. The writer makes a direct statement that describes one thing as if it is another, inviting us to apply our imagination in a more powerful manner. For example: The world’s your oyster.
ACTIVITY 4.3 Kaleidoscope of colours

a Use the chart to make a list of the key colours you can see in Collins St, 5p.m.
b Next to them write interesting and unusual descriptions of each colour. One has been completed to get you started.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colour</th>
<th>Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Tea-stained, sepia, bronze</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ACTIVITY 4.4 Writing similes

Write five similes (written by yourself or your classmates) that you think are most effective at describing aspects of the painting. Refer to these for inspiration when you come to write your own creative work.

1
2
3
4
5

ACTIVITY 4.5 Writing metaphors

Work individually or in pairs to create a metaphor poem about the painting.

a Choose an item in the painting Collins St, 5p.m. such as the face of a man or woman in the crowd, the crowd itself, the tree or the lamp post.

b List some adjectives to describe it. For example, if you chose a face in the crowd you might suggest adjectives such as ‘gloomy’, ‘tired’ or ‘depressed’.
c Choose an adjective from your list and write down the things that the adjective reminds you of. For example, if your adjective is ‘gloomy’ then you might write ‘stormy sky’, ‘empty house’ or ‘city in rain’.

d Choose one adjective and create a simile using your item. Here’s an example: ‘Her face is like an empty house’. Use the words ‘like’ or ‘as’ in your similes.

e Use your simile as the first line of your poem but remember to take out the words ‘like’ or ‘as’, since you’re creating a metaphor poem. Continue to develop your poem by writing more about your item—add other ways of describing it, think about where it might be, what it is doing or where it might be going. For example, if your item is a face in the crowd, your finished poem might read:

Her face is an empty house,
A stone sculpture on stiff shoulders
Staring blindly at the path ahead
Lost in the peak-hour crush.

f Write your metaphor poem here.

Rounding up

Using word strings and writing poems collaboratively are great ways of building your vocabulary, and you can even create your own descriptions with inventive collective nouns. Having a wide range of descriptive words for colour will be useful for when you come to write a creative piece. Use your skills in incorporating similes and metaphors to bring your words to life.