

Making



Objects

Speak

Wisdom Paper: Slow Looking and Writing Audio Tours

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“Making Objects Speak” is a valuable program that helps students slow down as they look at things. In today’s world, we’re on overload, flooded with info, media, entertainment, tasks, and worries. But it’s not just overload itself we have to fear; it’s the effect of overload— we lose the ability to think.

As adults we know how important slowing down is. We cherish the focus of reading, of following an author’s train of thought. We slow down with confidence, knowing that focusing on one thing, we can get something of value. Our students, often inexperienced readers, however, need to learn this confidence, and that focusing pays.

The LTL mode of teaching helps students learn to slow down by spending an hour looking at seven or eight objects in a museum. The eye is one pathway to the mind, and focusing on the process of seeing visually is an exciting journey, like reading. So too is the process of writing an audio-guide. Squarely facing three particular hurdles made that process satisfying for me.

The first was finding the objects in my museum, the New-York Historical Society. That step helped with the overload I felt doing a new task. Once I chose the precise objects I would have students look at, everything began to fall into place.

The second hurdle was a title. I’m surprised some faculty don’t require students to provide titles for their essays. Writing a title is like writing a business letter. It focuses the mind! Once I chose the title “Civil War Stories,” I knew where I was going.

My biggest hurdle was my resistance to the topic of war. The key here is that whatever resistance I face as a writer suggests a resistance that a reader may feel. If I can understand my own resistance, I can address that of my reader.

In high school, during football season, I played the glockenspiel and ignored the game, chatting my way through it the way others did through English class. The logistics of war have been like football to me, something to avoid. War meant horror, even if it saved the

nation and eradicated slavery. I've written books—I've participated in and even planned anti-war demonstrations—and I've studied the whys and wherefores of war in history. But I'd never looked a war's logistics in the face. Now I would.

I'd taken a step in that direction in a novel I'm currently writing about 1915 Turkey. I slowed down to consider Britain's disastrous set of mistakes in the Straits of Dardanelles. The Brits didn't know that a week before its invasion, the Turks had laid new mines in the water. The British assumed Turks were easy targets and that they, the British, with a huge fleet amassed in the Mediterranean, could easily "penetrate" the Straits. Massive explosions in the Dardanelles harbor followed as the Turkish mines sunk three huge dreadnoughts. The ships went down and the great fleet had to flee the Straits. Having failed with its navy to conquer the Straits, now England would try its army on a peninsula in the same waters, and anyone who has watched the movie *Gallipoli* knows about that horror.

Writing *Civil War Stories* was the perfect follow-up as I forced myself to actually look at battle paintings. When I introduced *Cavalry Charge, An Episode of War* in my guide, I started with my first reaction—"you may find this painting dark and dreary, big and chaotic," before looking at some fascinating details. In the small painting *Battle of Mobile Bay*, I looked for my own ignorance, which was considerable—vocabulary can be a great stumbling block. I grabbed hold of what I knew like a life raft, like that the stars and stripes identified the Union ships. It turned out there were mines too, and one of them sunk a Union ironclad. The admiral had a dilemma—either back out and call off the whole thing, like the British, because of the mines—or press ahead. The Admiral said, "Damn the torpedoes, full steam ahead!" Once I learned (and explained) torpedo meant mine, I got it. Then too, who had known that a country coordinated its navy and army in a campaign—(the navy in Mobile Bay and the army on land)—or that a war could be both old-fashioned and modern (the fleet had old sailing ships and new ironclads)? The admiral's call broke the Confederate resistance, and my own slow-looking broke my own resistance to thinking about war.

It turns out that to make the reader slow down with confidence, I have to make myself, the writer, slow down. I must face down my impulse to go rushing ahead. Then I'm positioned to slow the reader down and we can go somewhere together away from the disabilities of overload and fear.