Representing the Past, Present, and Future
Grades 6–12

Create a Personal History Poem

WICHITA ART MUSEUM
Representing the Past, Present, and Future (Grades 6–12)

Create a Personal History Poem

This lesson can easily be adapted for lower and upper grades

Essential Questions
- How can artists and writers represent time in their work?
- What sources inspire artists and writers?
- How can you read a work of art like a text?

Questions for the Student
- What’s going on in this picture?
- List the things you notice in the background, middle ground, and foreground.
- What kind of buildings or structures do you see?
- What figures do you see? What are the figures doing?
- Who does the job of building a society? Who gets the credit?
- What do you think the artist wants us to know or think about?

Art deco was a new and exciting approach to design in the 1920s and 1930s. Not a singular style, but an intertwining of various styles—streamlined and sleek forms, geometric shapes, and patterns, to name a few—art deco left its mark worldwide. Its abstract and stylized design used symbols of the past and technology of the future. A blending of the ancient and the modern, although seemingly contradictive, makes for a visually striking style. During this time, groundbreaking discoveries were happening—excavations in Pompeii, Troy and, the most famous, King Tut’s tomb in Egypt—alongside booming industry and technology. Art deco combines, borrows from, and takes inspiration from the past and present while looking to the future.

Aaron Douglas grew up in Topeka, Kansas, and later studied art in Nebraska, New York, and Paris. He was an active artist, illustrating the editorials of civil rights leaders during the Harlem Renaissance. His work often reflected African Americans’ intellectual and artistic achievements. The artwork *Building More Stately Mansions* demonstrates that black labors were essential to making great civilizations.

In *Building More Stately Mansions*, the figures in the foreground are flattened and silhouetted against their background, almost ghost-like in nature. In the background, forms resemble monumental structures from different societies across the globe throughout time. They symbolize the values of the most powerful members of these societies. The singular structure in the foreground appears decrepit and underwhelming when contrasted with the other monumental structures.

Aaron Douglas titled his work from the last stanza of Oliver Wendell Holmes’s poem, “The Chambered Nautilus,” first published in 1858.

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life’s unresting sea!

The poem is about a sea creature, the nautilus, who lives in its shell’s outermost ring. As it grows, it builds larger chambers in its shell, leaving the smaller ones behind—an ode to the passing of time, as we grow and change throughout our lives.

“Who am I?” is a question many young people grapple with. Writing a bio-poem is an excellent way to explore their personal identity. A bio-poem is a poem about a person; in this case, that person is the student. It follows a predictable pattern and does not necessarily rhyme. Bio-poems help students get beyond the more apparent aspects of identity (like their ethnicity, gender, and age) and instead explore what shapes their identity, like experiences, relationships, hopes, and interests.

1. Explain what a bio-poem is to your students. Students will write three separate sections for this writing activity, reflecting on their past, present, and imagined future. You may want to extend this lesson over three separate writing sessions, allowing students time to think and reflect.

2. Follow the attached worksheet for each section: My Past, My Present, My Future. Each section will begin with the student’s name. Suggestions are given for completing each line of the poem. However, the format can be adaptable if students want to include specific memories or important phrases. Students can work separately or in groups to brainstorm ideas for each section.

3. Have students share their poems. Some sharing examples include posting them around the room as part of a gallery walk, sharing them with a partner, or reading their poems to the whole class.
Bio-Poem Example

My Past
Alex
Small, timid, shy
Sibling of Charles and Shayla
Who loved climbing trees, roller skating, and eating Oreos
Who felt anxious when we moved to a new town
Who feared millipedes, the dark, and thunder
Who made perfect attendance, rescued Princess Peach, and mastered blowing bubble gum
Who wanted to ride the roller coaster and swim past the buoys
Who lived at the end of a small cul-de-sac

My Present
Alex
Ambitious, thoughtful, fun-spirited
The best sibling between Shayla and Charles
Who loves pizza and Final Fantasy XIV
Who feels confused, dreamy, and hopeful
Who fears being lost, alone, running out of time
Who is studying, socializing, and changing
Who wants to try sky-diving and go to college
Who lives on a tree-lined street

My Future
Alex
Settled, wealthy, smart, happy
Who will be a grandparent
Who will always love family, pizza, and game night
Who will feel accomplished, loved, and a little tired
Who will fear time, wrinkles, and sickness
Who will help others to succeed
Who will want to see my kids be happy and watch the first spaceship land on Mars
Who will live in peace.

Students can pass their poems to peers to read and make comments or ask questions. The margins should be filled with peers’ feedback when they get their poem back. Be sure to address what are appropriate comments to make beforehand.

Have students create an artwork based on their poem.
Writing—Text Types and Purposes
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

Writing—Production and Distribution of Writing
Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Writing—Language in Writing
Demonstrate command of and use knowledge of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing.
Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.
Bio-Poem Example

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Sibling of Charles and Shayla
Who loved climbing trees, roller skating, and eating Oreos
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Who will help others to succeed
Who will want to see my kids be happy and watch the first spaceship land on Mars
Who will live in peace.
Worksheet for Visualizing My Past in a Personal History Poem

Directions

My Past

(Line 1) First name
(Line 2) Three or four adjectives that describe the way you were
(Line 3) Important relationship you had (The child, friend, of . . .)
(Line 4) Two or three things, people, or ideas that you loved (Who loved . . .)
(Line 5) Three feelings you experienced (Who felt when . . .)
(Line 6) Three fears you had or experienced (Who feared . . .)
(Line 7) Accomplishments you made (Who composed, discovered, helped . . .)
(Line 8) Two or three things you wanted to see happen or wanted to experience
(Line 9) Where you lived (Who lived . . .)

FROM THE PAST: Think back to a time when you were much younger. How would your younger self complete each of these lines?
**Worksheet for Visualizing My Present in a Personal History Poem**

**Directions**

*My Present*

(Line 1) First name

(Line 2) Three or four adjectives that describe the way you are now

(Line 3) Important relationship you have now (Friend, sibling of)

(Line 4) Two or three things, people, or ideas that you love now (Who loves . . .)

(Line 5) Three feelings you experience now (Who feels . . .)

(Line 6) Three fears you have (Who fears . . .)

(Line 7) Accomplishments you are working on (Who is working, discovering, helping . . .)

(Line 8) Two or three things you want to see happen or want to experience

(Line 9) Where you live (Who lives . . .)

**FROM THE PRESENT:** In this next section, begin with your name then follow the same idea as before. This time, think about aspects to your life NOW, in this present moment.
Worksheet for Visualizing My Future in a Personal History Poem

Directions

My Future

(Line 1) First name
(Line 2) Three or four adjectives that describe your future self
(Line 3) Important relationship you will have in the future (Who will be the parent, friend . . .)
(Line 4) Two or three things, people, or ideas that your future self will love (Who will love . . .)
(Line 5) Three feelings you will experience in the future (Who will feel excited, hurt, joyous, when . . .)
(Line 6) Three fears you will have in the future (Who will fear . . .)
(Line 7) Accomplishments you are proud of (Who will discover, help, create . . .)
(Line 8) Two or three things you want to see happen or want to experience (Who will want to . . .)
(Line 9) Where you will live (Who will live . . .)

IN THE FUTURE: In this last section, think about your future. Imagine what it might be like as you fill in each of the lines.