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*Employment of Negroes in Agriculture, 1934*  
Earle Richardson

# LABOR

## *Writing a Journal Entry from a Laborer's Point of View*

**Arts Integration:**

Visual Arts and English/Language Arts

**Target Audience:**

Grades 4-12

**Description:**

Students explore Earle Richardson's *Employment of Negroes in Agriculture, 1934*, an artwork about cotton farming, and write a journal entry about the point of view of one character from the painting.

**Curricular Objectives:**

Visual Arts:

The student makes connections between the visual arts, other disciplines and the real world. English/Language Arts  
The student will use pre-writing strategies to generate ideas.  
The student develops and demonstrates creative writing.

Social Studies/History:

The student consults primary sources.

**Lesson Logistics:**

Materials:

Image of painting by Earle Richardson: *Employment of Negroes in Agriculture, 1934*, which can be found at <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=20876>

Writing a Journal Entry worksheet (page 6)  
Paper and pen or pencil

Space:

Classroom (no particular arrangement)



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### **Vocabulary:**

Visual Arts: setting, foreground (the area of the painting that seems closest)

Social Studies/History primary source material

### **Lesson Strategy:**

#### Starting the Lesson:

- Although there were only about ten out of thousands of artists, African American artists were welcomed into the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). They were mainly asked to paint scenes that told about African American life.

#### Building the Learning Experiences:

- Begin exploring Richardson's artwork by making observations about the work. To begin, these observations should be statements of fact, not interpretation. Ask, "Who or what do you see?" As students respond, follow up by asking, "What makes you say that?" Encourage the students to find evidence in the art that supports the main idea. Then ask, "What else do you see?" to help develop observation skills. Often observations will lead to interpretation. Some additional questions to consider asking that prompt interpretation are:
  - What is happening here?
  - What is the setting for this painting? Where in the United States might this scene have taken place?
  - What is the mood of this work?
  - What kinds of clothes are the people wearing? How do they compare to what you are wearing?
  - Why do you think the people are barefoot?
  - Do you think the people are downtrodden or proud? Why?
  - How do you think the artist feels about these people? What makes you say that?
  - Why do you think the artist put the people in the foreground of the painting? (putting people in the foreground makes them the most important thing about the painting, and helps us to see their facial expressions.)
  - What is appealing or unappealing about what you see?
  - Would you like to be part of this world? Why?
- Imagine that you are one of the figures in the painting. Which person would you be? Using the painting as a guide:
  - Write something your character might do.
  - Write something your character might think.
  - Write something that your character might feel.

Using the notes you wrote as guide to write a short journal entry about what is happening from your character's point of view.

#### Assessment:

- Students can write a journal entry that reflects the discussion of Richardson's painting
- Student's journal entry gives a point of view.



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### Summary:

- Share a few journal entries with the class. How do the written descriptions reflect what is seen in the painting?

### Documentation:

**In English/Language Arts we thought about what it would be like to pick cotton.**

Post a reproduction of Earle Richardson's painting with the students' journal entries.

### Social Studies/History Extensions:

#### *Elementary Schools:*

#### Research

- Many people fleeing the Dust Bowl went to California to look for agricultural work. Ross Dickinson's painting, *Valley Farms*, clearly portrays southern California farmland. Find the painting here: <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=6817>  
What is the topography of this land? Where did farmers choose to grow crops? Why is this a good choice? Why the fields a verdant green, but the surrounding are hills a dry looking brown color? (the fields are irrigated) What was the source of water used to irrigate farms? (the river)

Research some of the following questions:

- What do you think was growing here before it became farmland? Today you would see a variety of crops. What are some of the primary crops grown in southern California? (tree fruit and nut crops)
- Dickinson showed smoke rising from a forest fire; when are forest fires most likely to occur in southern California? (June-October)
- Battles for control of water were legendary, and continue in California today. Where does southern California get most of its water? (the Lower Colorado River)
- Find evidence for what happened to the thousands of people who went to California to find farm work. (With 1.3 million people moving to California in the 1930s, finding work was difficult. This situation was exacerbated by mechanization of farms, which reduced the need for workers. Because workers were so plentiful, wages were depressed. Many white workers took jobs away from Mexican and Filipino immigrants.)

#### Analyze

- The film "The Plow that Broke the Plains" captures images of the Dust Bowl and explains some of the reasons it occurred. (lack of soil conservation practices; introduction of machinery that made it easier to plow; overgrazing) Watch the film and make of list of conditions that contributed to the Dust Bowl.



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## **Secondary Schools**

### **Research**

- Watch the excerpt of “The Plow that Broke the Plains.” (Directions for how to connect in the Resources section.) The research why the Dust Bowl occurred. (Lack of soil conservation practices; introduction of machinery that made it easier to plow; overgrazing)
- Anne Prentice Warner wrote about Earle Richardson’s painting in an article found at <http://www.antiquesandfineart.com/articles/article.cfm?request=939> She noted that the cotton pickers “might not have lacked jobs, but they suffered from prejudice, low pay, and the inability to get out of a degrading racially biased system made even worse by the Depression.” Research what type of prejudice African American farm workers faced, and the difference in pay scale between African American and white farm workers.

### **Arts Experiences for another Day:**

#### **All Schools**

#### **Music**

- Woody Guthrie sang many Dust Bowl ballads, one of which is “Do Re Mi.” The lyrics for this song are at [http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Do\\_Re\\_Mi.htm](http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Do_Re_Mi.htm). The song is about the number of people going to California looking for a better life. You can hear Woody Guthrie sing this song by going to [http://americanart.si.edu/education/picturing\\_the\\_1930s/](http://americanart.si.edu/education/picturing_the_1930s/). Click on the theater and then use the map icon to go the room labeled “Country.” Then click on the small radio icon. What instrument is Guthrie playing? What is the mood of the song? What creates that feeling? What do you think the term “Do Re Mi” means in the song?

## **Elementary Schools**

### **Drama**

- Write a dialogue for what the people in the Richardson painting might say to each other and then dramatize your theme. Become the character using face, body and voice.

### **Visual Arts**

- Be an artist; paint a picture of the kind of work you would like to do someday. Think about how to use color to create the mood of the place you want to work. What will you put in the picture to give people a clear idea of the place your work will take place?

### **Critical Thinking with Visual Images**

- Earle Richardson lived in New York State; no cotton is grown there. He because was unfamiliar with real cotton fields, he made some unintentional mistakes. It is unlikely that the people working in the cotton fields would wear colorful clothing like this. There are so many rows of white it looks as if the field has hardly been picked. After picking cotton, the stalks and leaves would look quite different. At the Library of Congress Website, look at photographs by Marion Post Wolcott, who took photographs of “Day laborers picking cotton near Clarksdale,



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Mississippi” in 1939 under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration. One example can be found here: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/pnp/fsac/1a34000/1a34300/1a34337v.jpg> Compare the look of the workers and the cotton field to Richardson’s painting. Pay special attention to the way the stalks and leaves of the cotton plant look in the photograph, compared to the painting. Draw conclusions about what you see.

## Secondary Schools

### Creative Writing

- Imagine that Richardson’s painting is a scene from a movie. Make up a story about who the characters are, and what is happening.

### Critical Thinking with Visual Images

- During the 1930s farming was a challenge. In the Midwestern states, where farmers ploughed large areas of the land, when a drought came, the soil literally blew away in the wind, creating what became known as the Dust Bowl. Hundreds of people left their farms and traveled west trying to find work. The PWAP artists like Richardson, however, generally painted more prosperous times. Compare Richardson’s painting with one by Alexander Hogue, who painted *Dust Bowl* in 1933. <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=10614>

### Developing Observation Skills (uses primary source material)

- Marion Post Wolcott, a photographer for the Farm Security Administration, recorded many aspects of the cotton industry, from picking, to delivering the cotton to the warehouse, baling, and so forth. Her photographs are at this Library of Congress site: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=marion+wolcott+post+cotton+pickers&sp=1&co=fsa> Write a paper that tells the story of farming cotton in the 1930s using the photographs as illustrations. Be sure to look at the photographs carefully so that you capture the conditions illustrated.

### Critical Thinking (uses primary source material)

- The photographs Dorothea Lange took for the Farm Security Administration told of the agony of a family picking peas in California during the Depression and did a great deal to bring the plight of destitute farmers to the attention of Congress. Her most famous photo, *Migrant Mother*, is a powerful photograph of mother who had just sold the family tent to pay for food. You can find it at this Library of Congress site: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa1998021539/PP/>. There are a number of other photographs in this sequence taken by Lange, as well as photographs of other migrants. That reveal many of the working and living conditions. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=Lange&co=fsa> What about these pictures stirred the government into action to help? Research what other causes have been helped by stirring photographs, and report on how the photograph changed (or did not change) subsequent actions.
- In an interview, Dorothea Lange told the story of taking the picture of the *Migrant Mother* at



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<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/migrantmother.htm>. After reading the story, choose another photograph by Lange (use one of the websites listed above) and write a list of questions that you would ask her if you interviewed her.

### Developing Observation Skills with Visual Images

- Elizabeth [Betsy] Broun, director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, discussed Earle Richardson's painting on NPR, noting that it combined a Mexican mural style (of artists like Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco) with art found on the walls of Egyptian tombs. <http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=101275990&m=101442922>. Research Mexican murals and Egyptian wall paintings and determine what stylistic elements Broun believes Richardson incorporated.

### Resources:

#### **Film:**

Excerpts of the film "The Plow that Broke the Plains" can be seen at [http://americanart.si.edu/education/picturing\\_the\\_1930s](http://americanart.si.edu/education/picturing_the_1930s). Enter the building by clicking on the movie theater. Use the map key to go the room marked "The Country" and then click on the projector icon.

#### **Books:**

*How Artists See WORK*, by Colleen Carroll.

This book covers images of farm, factory, office and home.

*Looking at Art: People at Work*, by Patrick Connor

This book covers workplaces from factories to farms to construction. The work features both western and non-western art. Good explanations of the paintings accompany the illustrations.

#### **Photo Credit for page 1:**

*Employment of Negroes in Agriculture*, 1934

Earle Richardson

Born: New York, New York 1912

Died: New York, New York 1935

oil on canvas 48 x 32 1/8 in. (121.8 x 81.6 cm.)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor

1964.1.183



## WRITING A JOURNAL ENTRY

Based on Earle Richardson's *Employment of Negroes in Agriculture, 1934*,

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Grade/Session \_\_\_\_\_

Imagine that you are one of the figures in the painting. Which person would you be?

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Using the painting as a guide:

1. Write something your character might do.

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2. Write something your character might think

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3. Write something that your character might feel.

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4. Using the observations above, write a short journal entry about what is happening in the painting from your character's point of view. You may use the space below and the back of the paper to complete your entry.