

# NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM



## Setting the Scene: Norman Rockwell and Narrative

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Subject Areas: English Language Arts, Visual Arts

Grades: K-2nd grade; 3rd-5th grade

Theme: Narrative/Storytelling

In this lesson, we will explore the art of Norman Rockwell through the lens of narrative and elements of storytelling, with a focus on how he uses visual elements to tell a story. Then we will use these ideas as inspiration to extend these moments through drawing, writing and performance.

### Key Terms

**Narrative** is a story, a description, or an account of events.

**Details** are the bits of factual information (about setting, character, action, etc.) that help the reader or viewer understand what is going on.

**Character** is a person, animal, creature, being, or thing in a story.

**Setting** is the place and time and in which a story is told.

### Step 1: Look and Discuss

Describe this artwork to a classmate as completely as possible.

- What new things did you discover as you described it that you had not noticed before?
- Did you find any details that surprised you?
- How did these new details change what you thought about the painting?

Describe the characters in this painting.

- What do you notice about them?
- What details has the artist included that give you information about who they are?

### Character

Choose one character from these paintings.

- Look closely at this character's facial expression. How do you think they might be feeling? If they could talk, what would they say? Using your body, take the pose of this character. If they were to move, what would they do next?
- Using your imagination, think about a day in this person's life. What is the first thing they do when they wake up? What kind of things might they do during their day?
- Do you think this person's life is similar to or different from yours? How so? Would you like to trade places with this person for a day? Why or why not?

### Setting

Describe the setting of this painting.

- Where are we? How would you describe this place?
- What time of day do you think it might be? What season of the year? What details do you see that support your idea?
- If you could go into this place, what sounds would you hear? What might you do while you were there?
- Has the artist left any details out of the setting? If you could draw them in, what would you add?

### Plot

- What do you think happened in the moment before this scene? What clues do you see in the painting that give you this idea?
- If this painting were to suddenly come to life, what would the characters do? What do you think might happen next?

## Step 2: Learn More

*“Every artist has a story to tell. The canvas is their stage and paint the language they use to speak.”*

-Norman Rockwell

Norman Rockwell was a visual storyteller who was known for being able to tell a whole story in just one frame. His masterful use of details to create immediately recognizable narratives made him one of America’s most iconic painters. In his paintings, he skillfully used narrative elements such as character and setting to set the scene. His extensive use of detail helped to develop the narrative aspect of his paintings; he said that he “always strived to capture everything I saw as completely as possible.” Rockwell’s visual narratives speak to both the current events of the time in which they were created as well as to universal themes and ideas that resonate in the present day.

### ***Family Home from Vacation, 1930***



After the stock market crash of 1929, America entered the Great Depression, a decade of economic uncertainty, mass unemployment and bank failures.

This image, published a year after the crash in 1930, portrays a family exhausted after returning from a vacation. Despite the difficult times, this family has

managed to take a vacation. In fact, they had such a good time they are completely worn out. Using humor and providing clues pointing to where the family might have gone and what they might have done, such as a pail, a limp balloon and a frog that is about to escape from the box on the boy’s lap, Rockwell emphasizes the simple pleasures of family life and provides an uplifting message to the many Americans facing economic hardship

### ***Freedom from Fear, 1942***



*Freedom from Fear* was painted during WWII, while Europe was under siege, but America had not yet entered the war. At this point most American families enjoyed relative safety from the war overseas, but the threat was on everyone’s mind. While the scene initially seems peaceful, the words “bombings” and “horror” on the headline of the father’s folded newspaper evoke a different feeling. Rockwell wanted to convey the idea that parents should be able to put their children to bed each night knowing that they will be safe. He added details to emphasize the serene and intimate feeling of the scene, such as a warm light streaming from the floor below and a doll tossed and forgotten on the floor.

Later in his life Rockwell was somewhat critical of this painting saying it was insensitive to celebrate that American children were safe in their own beds as Europe burned. Rockwell’s point was that all children across the world deserve to live without fear.

## ***New Kids in the Neighborhood, 1967***



*"I love to do a picture which shows a progression of action, a sequence of ideas at a glance"*

-Norman Rockwell

Until the American civil rights movement in the 1960s, many places in America practiced racial segregation - making Black and White people use separate hotels, restaurants, and bathrooms - because of their different skin colors.

Many places had signs that read "Whites only". Neighborhoods were often segregated, and African Americans and other minority groups were not allowed to live in White neighborhoods. The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, making it illegal to discriminate based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. By the mid-1960s Black families were moving into neighborhoods where they had not been allowed to live before.

*New Kids in the Neighborhood* was created for a 1967 article in *Look Magazine* on housing desegregation. In 1967, when this painting was created, there were lots of neighborhoods where African-American families did not and could not live. However, Rockwell's painting tells a more hopeful story about the changing racial profile of a suburban neighborhood. A Black family with a boy and a girl have moved into a White neighborhood, and this scene shows the meeting of the 'new kids' and the other neighborhood kids. Rather than focusing on the racial differences of the children, Rockwell emphasizes their commonalities, including details that the kids share between them such as pink hair ribbons and baseball gloves. As a visual storyteller, Rockwell encourages us to wonder what might

come next for these kids who mirror one another and seem curious about their counterparts.

Interestingly, adults are not the main characters in this story. The only adults are a man emptying the moving van who doesn't even see the kids, and a nosy neighbor peeking out from behind the partially closed curtains of her house next door. Rockwell asks us to consider whether or not all the neighbors will be as open to new people as the kids in this scene are likely to be.

### **Step 3: Create your own**

#### **Get in Character**

Have students choose one character from these paintings, and write a first-person narrative of the character they chose. Younger students can write a list of words describing their character, and think of one thing the character might say. Collect the stories and read a few aloud. See if the class can guess which character's voice is being expressed in each story.

#### **Make a Storyboard**

A storyboard is a sequential drawing that shows the plot of a story or script. People who work on movies, books, cartoons, commercials, or other media use this tool to plan their stories.

Have students choose one of these paintings and create a storyboard that describes what happened just before, during, and after the moment that Rockwell has shown. Include both sketches and text that illustrate the sequence of actions. If students would like, they can add additional storyboard templates to extend the story. [LINK to templates]

#### **Script and Perform a Scene**

Working in groups, have students choose one of these paintings and think of it as a scene from a play. Have them select a character they would like to portray and script a dialogue for their character. Students can work together to decide on stage directions and then perform the scene for the class.

## NATIONAL LEARNING STANDARDS

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS

NL-ENG.K-12.3 EVALUATION STRATEGIES  
NL-ENG.K-12.4 COMMUNICATION SKILLS  
NL-ENG.K-12.5 COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES  
NL-ENG.K-12.6 APPLYING KNOWLEDGE  
NL-ENG.K-12.12 APPLYING LANGUAGE SKILLS

### VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS

NA-VA.K-4.2 USING KNOWLEDGE OF STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONS  
NA-VA.K-4.3 CHOOSING AND EVALUATING A RANGE OF SUBJECT MATTER, SYMBOLS, AND IDEAS  
NA-VA.K-4.5 REFLECTING UPON AND ASSESSING THE CHARACTERISTICS AND MERITS OF THEIR WORK AND THE WORK OF OTHERS  
NA-VA.K-4.6 MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN VISUAL ARTS AND OTHER DISCIPLINES

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COVER, TOP RIGHT, Norman Rockwell, *Family Home from Vacation*, 1930. Cover illustration for *The Saturday Evening Post*. ©1930 SEPS: Curtis Licensing, Indianapolis, IN. All rights reserved.

COVER, BOTTOM Norman Rockwell, *New Kids in the Neighborhood*, 1967. Illustration for *Look*, May 16, 1967. Norman Rockwell Museum Collection, Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust. ©Licensed by Norman Rockwell Family Agency. All rights reserved