



TEACHING INSTRUCTIONS

The History Boys

By Alan Bennett
Directed by Paul Miller
Original direction by
Nicholas Hytner

Nov 7–Dec 9, 2007
Ahmanson Theatre

How to Use the Discovery Guide

TO THE TEACHER

The Discovery Guide for *The History Boys* has been developed as a prompt-book for a standards-based unit of study appropriate for grades 9 through 12. The specific learning activities in theatre arts can be readily integrated with other content areas, particularly Language Arts and History/Social Science, to accelerate teaching and learning.

The Discovery Guide is a starting point. Please adapt the material and extend the learning activities to meet the needs of your particular community of learners. Our hope is that the structure and content of this guide will not be merely functional, but also inspiring – and that teachers and students will share the thrill of learning through theatre arts.

The Discovery Guide is not designed as an independent workbook. It is a resource for learners to develop skills in public speaking, critical analysis and collaboration that are essential in Theatre Arts, Language Arts, History/Social Science and other content areas. Oral discussion and writing prompts are designed so that students may relate key ideas to their personal experiences and the world around them. Teachers are expected to adapt or extend the prompts. Teachers may choose some prompts for small group discussion and others for the whole group.

Writing Applications

Many of the prompts in the Guide are easily adaptable to match writing objectives your class might already be studying. Written responses to the prompts may range from short expository answers in complete sentences to formal, five-paragraph persuasive essays.

In any case, teachers at all grade levels are encouraged to design at least one rigorous, standards-based written performance assignment in conjunction with their unit on *The History Boys*.

Oral Applications

The students in *The History Boys* are particularly adept at oral presentation, be it interpretive, persuasive or informational. There are several exercises in the Discovery Guide designed to give your students an opportunity to practice their public speaking skills.

Scope and Sequence of the Lessons

In order to provide a comprehensive and sequential unit of study, we suggest that students have the opportunity to explore the whole variety of lessons in the Discovery Guide.

The activities are designed to be completed in sequence. The activities on pages 4 – 11 are to be completed before the students see the production of *The History Boys*. The discussion and writing prompts on pages 12 – 14 and the resources listed on page 15 are intended to stimulate reflection, analysis and further inquiry after students attend the play.

Vocabulary: Introduce the key vocabulary words on each page as they occur. Help students pronounce the words correctly; provide opportunities to use the words in complete sentences.

The Standards

Teachers should “bundle” one of the recommended theatre focus standards with a focus standard from another content area to help design their classes’ integrated units of study.

For instance, you might be able to “bundle” one of the recommended history/social sciences focus standards with a focus standard from theatre and another content area such as language arts to help design the classes’ integrated units of study.

THEATRE

Artistic Perception:

Development of the Vocabulary of Theatre

1.1 Students observe theatrical productions and respond to them, using the vocabulary and language of the theatre.

Historical and Cultural Context:

Role and Cultural Significance of Theatre

3.1 Identify and compare how film, theatre, television, and electronic media productions influence values and behaviors.

3.2 Describe the ways in which playwrights reflect and influence their culture.

Connections, Relationships, Applications:

Connections and Applications

5.1 Students apply what they learn in theatre, film/video, and electronic media across subject areas.

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTS

Literary Response and Analysis:

Narrative Analysis of Grade-Level-Appropriate Text

3.2 Analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on life, using textual evidence to support the claim.

3.4 Analyze ways in which poets use imagery, personification, figures of speech, and sounds to evoke readers’ emotions.

3.5 Compare works that express a universal theme and provide evidence to support the ideas expressed in each work.

Writing Strategies:

Organization and Focus

1.1 Demonstrate an understanding of the elements of discourse (e.g., purpose, speaker, audience, form) when completing narrative, expository, persuasive, or descriptive writing assignments.

1.2 Use point of view, characterization, style (e.g., use of irony), and related elements for specific rhetorical and aesthetic purposes.

1.3 Structure ideas and arguments in a sustained, persuasive, and sophisticated way and support them with precise and relevant examples.

1.4 Enhance meaning by employing rhetorical devices, including the extended use of parallelism, repetition, and analogy; the incorporation of visual aids (e.g., graphs, tables, pictures); and the issuance of a call for action.

1.5 Use language in natural, fresh, and vivid ways to establish a specific tone.

Research & Technology

1.6 Develop presentations by using clear research questions and creative and critical research strategies (e.g., field studies, oral histories, interviews, experiments, electronic sources).

1.7 Use systematic strategies to organize and record information (e.g., anecdotal scripting, annotated bibliographies).

Writing Applications:

2.4 Write persuasive compositions.

2.4 Write historical investigation reports.

2.6 Deliver multimedia presentations.

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTS *(cont'd)*

Speaking Applications:

- 2.2 Deliver oral reports on historical investigations.
- 2.4 Deliver multimedia presentations.
- 2.5 Recite poems, selections from speeches, or dramatic soliloquies with attention to performance details to achieve clarity, force, and aesthetic effect and to demonstrate an understanding of the meaning (e.g., Hamlet's soliloquy "To Be or Not to Be").
- 2.5 Deliver persuasive arguments.

HISTORY/SOCIAL SCIENCE

Historical Interpretation:

- 1. Students show the connections, causal and otherwise, between particular historical events and larger social, economic, and political trends and developments.
- 2. Students recognize the complexity of historical causes and effects,

including the limitations on determining cause and effect.
4. Students understand the meaning, implication, and impact of historical events and recognize that events could have taken other directions.

Analysis Skills:

Historical Literacy

- Develop research skills.
- Analyze cause and effect.
- Understand the reasons for continuity and change.
- Recognize history as common memory, with political implications.

Participation Skills:

- Develop group interaction skills.



BEFORE THE PLAY



Page 2: How to Use this Discovery Guide

Rationale: Students will be able to optimize their learning if they have a clear understanding of the layout of the Discovery Guide and objectives of the exercises contained in the unit. This will help them describe their learning process.

Optional Exercise: Read and discuss the objectives of the Discovery Guide with the class.

BEFORE THE PLAY



Page 4

Page 4: A British Education

Rationale: This section of the Guide will give students a context for the action of the play. It is particularly important that students understand where the characters in *The History Boys* are in their educational careers – having completed 6th form, most of them are over 18, equivalent to a U.S. high school graduate.

Exercise: Use this exercise to foster a brief discussion of the ways in which the British educational system differs from our American system. Notable are the age at which English students may stop going to school and enter the workforce – 16! – and the clear delineation between schools intended for university-bound students and those that provide a more general education. This difference could spark a discussion about how much schooling is necessary, what kids need to learn, predetermining and thus limiting kids' potential, etc.

Exercise: Ask the students which American universities would have the comparable prestige of Oxford and Cambridge. In fact, one American university renamed the town in which it was established in order to suggest academic ties with one of these two British universities. (Harvard is in Cambridge, Massachusetts.)

BEFORE THE PLAY

Synopsis of The History Boys

WHEN THE GREAT TEACHERS OF THE HISTORY BOYS meet, they are not just teachers, they are men. They are men who have spent their lives in the classroom, and they are men who have spent their lives in the classroom. They are men who have spent their lives in the classroom, and they are men who have spent their lives in the classroom.

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Page 5

Page 5: Synopsis of *The History Boys*

Rationale: A general understanding of the plot will help students adjust to the English accents and unfamiliar terminology used in the play.

Exercise: Read and discuss the synopsis and sidebar. Note that the play contains sexual content for which you may want to prepare your students: the homosexuality of Irwin, Hector and Posner – and, most especially, Hector’s fondling of the boys on the back of his motorcycle. Playwright Alan Bennett has drawn heat from some critics for soft-peddling Hector’s behavior. Paul Miller, director of the CTG production of the play, offers this explanation:

“I don’t think the actions of Hector are treated as a non-issue in the play, but what is pointed out is how it’s the grown-ups who panic: the boys are pretty sophisticated about it. Hector’s remark [‘The transmission of knowledge is in itself an erotic act. In the Renaissance...’] is surely a deliberately ironic one to the cowardly and philistine Headmaster. It is he, after all, who should have faced up to Hector’s activities when he found out about them rather than covering it up for the sake of the school’s reputation. Also it’s important to remember that these boys have passed their A levels and are thus 18+ in the play.”

For a fuller discussion of these themes, “The Instructive Message of *The History Boys*” by Philip Kennicott (Washington Post, December 10, 2006: Page No1) is included with your teaching materials.

Exercise: Prepare the students to watch the production by asking them to observe what distinctions they can make in the personalities and teaching styles of the three teachers and their effect on the students, a discussion that they will return to in the “After the Play” section.

Optional Exercise: A useful map for helping students to delineate the principal characters is to separate the 3 teachers (Mrs. Lintott, Hector, Irwin) from the Headmaster and the 8 students (Akthar, Crowther, Dakin, Lockwood, Posner, Rudge, Scripps, Timms). Jot the names on the board in three columns with the Headmaster in the middle.

Historical References in *The History Boys*

THE REFORMATION:

Henry VIII
Cardinal Woolsey
Dissolution of the monasteries
The murder of Thomas Beckett

The Zulu Wars

The Boer Wars

WORLD WAR I:

Western front
Haig
Passchendalle
The Somme
Armistice
Treaty of Versailles
Humiliation of Germany at Versailles
Women lose jobs to returning soldiers (1919)
Centograph
The Unknown Soldier

WORLD WAR II:

Collapse of Weimar Republic
Hitler moves on Poland (1939)
Battles of Dunkirk and Alamein
Montgomery and Gott
Churchill and Halifax
Holocaust
Auschwitz and Dachau
Pearl Harbor
Post-imperial decline

Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister

The play contains numerous other references which might be used as supplementary topics:

ARTS AND LITERATURE:

Shakespeare's *King Lear*
The Trial
The Person from Porlock
Don Giovanni (the Commendatore)
Revelations
The Catcher in the Rye
The Mikado
Lord of the Rings
BBC2
The Spectator

PEOPLE AND CHARACTERS:

Piero della Franchesca
Van Gogh
Plato
Michelangelo
Oscar Wilde
Francis Bacon
Richard Rogers
(the architect, not the composer)
Wren
Hawksmoor
Shakespeare
Mozart
Bruckner
Tippett
Turner
Ingres
Rembrandt
Virginia Woolf
Jean Paul Sartre
Namier
Mr. Quelches
Wilfred Owen
Wittgenstein
George Orwell
Auden
Neitzsche
Stalin
Hardy
Larkin

FILM:

Now Voyager
The Seventh Veil
Brief Encounter
Svengali
The Sporting Life
Carry On films

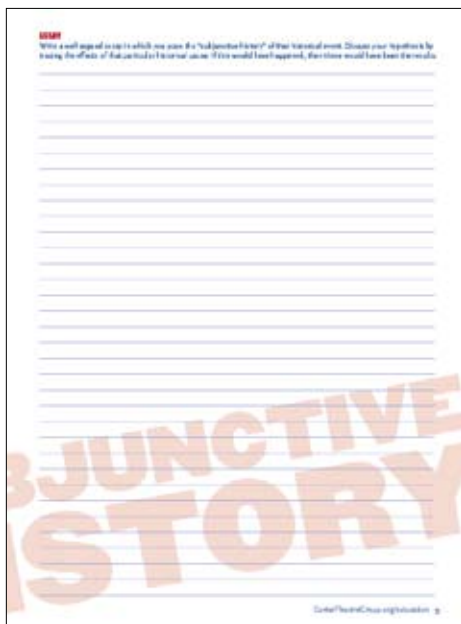
MUSIC AND SONGS:

Grieg's Piano Concerto
Gracie Fields: "Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Goodbye"
George Formby:
"When I'm Cleaning Windows"
Pet Shop Boys: "It's a Sin"
Rachmanninov's Second Piano Concerto
Edith Piaf: "La Vie En Rose"
"Bewitched"
"Bye Bye Blackbird"

BEFORE THE PLAY



Page 8



Page 9

Pages 6–9: (cont'd)

Exercise: Subjunctive History

Begin by clarifying the concept of subjunctive history with examples from your students' own lives. For example, "If I had not made the volleyball team, then..." Or, "If I have been born a girl, instead of a boy..." Or, "If I had studied for that big test..." Discuss both the personal and the broader implications to the revised histories. Follow up the primary result with secondary outcomes: And then what might happen? Once the class has a grasp of subjunctive history, apply it to a historical event.

Since this exercise requires a subject with which the student has some familiarity, it might be best to brainstorm with the class on a list of topics, then let students make their own choice. This is an excellent exercise for teaching cause and effect, which also requires a high level of critical thinking to project the possibilities of history.

BEFORE THE PLAY



Page 10



Page 11

Pages 10–11: Breaking Bread With the Dead

Rationale: This section highlights another principal theme of the play in asking students to first consider the value of arts and literature and then to explore the discipline firsthand through a hands-on oral interpretation assignment. Anchored by a Headmaster who regards the arts with disdain, this claim of value argument, as the essay illustrates, divides the characters of the play. Exploring some of the poetry that is incorporated in the play will give students the experience of being in Hector’s general studies class.

Exercise: Following the reading of the essay, a discussion on the value of arts and literature seems essential. You might ask students to consider what would be lost if, due to budget restrictions, arts and literature courses were stricken from the school curriculum. What value do they provide that might be lost?

Optional Exercise: Playing devil’s advocate, start a discussion by presenting the following quote from Alain de Botton’s book, *Status Anxiety*, which contains a chapter discussing this very issue:

“What is art good for? That question was in the air in Britain in the 1860s, and according to many commentators, the answer was, Not much. It was not art, after all, that had built the great industrial towns, laid the railways, dug the canals, expanded the empire and made Britain preeminent among nations. Indeed, art seemed capable of sapping the very qualities that had made such achievements possible.”

Then to stir things up further, you could present the oppositional argument with this quote from the same book:

“Poet and Critic Matthew Arnold, professor of poetry at Oxford ... had the impudence to keep hinting in a variety of newspaper articles and public lectures, that art might just be one of life’s most important pursuits ... Art was in fact, Arnold argued, an effective antidote for life’s deepest tensions and anxieties ... Novels, poems, plays, paintings, or films – can function to explain our condition to us. They may act as guides to a truer, more judicious, more intelligent understanding of the world.”

BEFORE THE PLAY

Pages 10–11: (cont'd)

Exercise: A Brief Lesson from the Masters

This exercise presents Auden's poem for class reading and analysis. Direct students to the image of Breughel's painting. You might use the poem as a class exercise in reading verse, employing several readings to unlock the message of the poem:

- Take turns reading lines of the poem around the class. Advise them to maintain the sense of punctuation, breathing at the periods and using brief sense pauses at the commas. Notice that the thought often does not conclude at the end of the line but wraps onto the next line. Ask them to follow that flow, pausing and breathing only as the punctuation allows.
- Read antiphonally, by dividing the class and having them alternate lines between the groups.
- Read the poem as a crescendo by accumulating voices, beginning with one student and adding on until everyone is reading together.
- Read the poem as a decrescendo by doing just the opposite.
- Ask students which words should bear emphasis by having the entire group join in and returning to the first approach (one student per line) with the class joining in on particular words.



Follow with a discussion of the meaning of the poem:

- What message does the poem carry for the reader? What is the lesson?
- How does it make you feel?
- Is the message something that is still relevant today?
- What significance might the poem have held when it was written in the late 1930s? What significant historical events were developing at that time? How might the poem be a response to those events?
- Why might the playwright have included this poem in play? What relevance might it have to the action of *The History Boys*?

Briefly, the poem is a response to tragedy and the apathy with which humans view individual suffering. The poem, like the painting, juxtaposes ordinary events against extraordinary ones: a “miraculous birth occurs” while Icarus dies. Students might not be familiar with the Greek myth of Daedalus and his son, Icarus, who flew too close to the sun wearing his wax wings. Therefore, it might be effective to read aloud a version of it in the class, drawing comparisons between the myth, the painting and the poem, and how one work of art has in turn influenced another. This moves directly back to Hector's quote about a work of literature reaching out to take the reader's hand. It also prepares the students for the next assignment which requires work on the memorization and interpretation of a poem of their choice.

BEFORE THE PLAY

Pages 10–11: *(cont'd)*

Exercise: The Possibility of Poetry

For this project, assign or have students select one of the following poems that appear in whole or part within the play. Divide the longer poems into chunks reasonable for your students. Memorization, interpretation and recitation not only will aid students in an understanding and appreciation of verse and poetry and familiarize them with many of the poems and poetic references used in the play, but it will also give them a taste of the knowledge and facility that the characters in the play possess.

Theme:

Innocence/Loss of Innocence

“Epitaphs of War 1914-1918”

by Rudyard Kipling

“MCMXIV” by Philip Larkin

“Voices Against England in the Night” by Stevie Smith

“Drummer Hodge” by Hardy

“The Soldier” by Rupert Brooke

Theme:

Suffering and the Human Condition

“Loveliest of Trees, The Cherry Now”

by A.E. Housman

“On Wenlock Edge, the Woods

in Trouble” by A.E. Housman

Other Poems Referenced

“Leaves of Grass” by Walt Whitman

“Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service”

by T.S. Eliot

“Lullaby” by W.H. Auden

AFTER THE PLAY



Page 12

Pages 12–13: Evaluating the Teachers of The History Boys

Rationale: This section follows up on an earlier instruction to observe the contrasting styles and personalities of the three teachers while watching the play. Here the students are asked to distinguish among the teachers and make some judgments about the approach and the effectiveness of the three teachers represented in the play. The exercises ask them to interpret the behavior of the characters and apply the fiction to their own life observations.

Exercise: What differences can the students discern among the three teachers? Once again, you might jot the names of the three teachers on the board, this time in three columns, asking students to provide some identifying traits as they explore the following: teaching style, type of classroom activities, attitude towards the students, personality, how they are viewed by the Headmaster and how they are viewed by the students. Discuss which students seem to be most influenced by each particular teacher.

Optional Exercise: Close the Quotations

This exercise asks students to identify which teacher is speaking in a series of quotes from the play. The Xeroxable handout is at the back of this packet.

Answers: Mrs. Lintott: 4, 7, 9;
 Irwin: 2, 6, 8; Hector: 1, 3, 5, 10

Optional Exercise: An added perspective of the teachers is provided by the boys. You might follow the discussion of the “Close the Quotations” exercise by reading the following quotes from the play and asking the class to determine which teacher is being referenced by the students.

1. “You’ve force-fed us the facts; now we’re in the process of running around acquiring flavor ... It makes me grateful for your lessons ... Firm foundations type thing. Point A. Point B. Point C.”
 —Rudge (about Mrs. Lintott)
2. “There was a contract between him and his class. Quite what the contract was or what it involved would be hard to say. But it was there.”
 —Akthar (about Hector)
3. “To you the Holocaust is just another topic on which we may get a question.”
 —Scripps (about Irwin)
4. “Some of the things he said ... or quoted anyway, you never knew which was which.”
 —Timms (about Hector)
5. “We decided, sir, you were meretricious but not disingenuous.”
 —Dakin (about Irwin)

AFTER THE PLAY



Page 13

Pages 12–13: (cont'd)

Exercise: The Ideal Teacher

Student responses to “The Ideal Teacher” are also grounds for discussion in small groups, which then can be opened up to the class at large. Lessons of the Masters by George Steiner (Harvard University Press, 2003) is a series of lectures exploring the dynamics between teacher and student, referenced by playwright Alan Bennett as a source of inspiration for the play.

Exercise: Developing the Habit of Contradiction

Irwin’s methods are practiced in this exercise, in which students are challenged to sharpen their original thinking and argumentative skills. It also makes the students consider their audience when they approach a topic: Who will read my essay? Might many other writers present the same argument to the audience? What options might I take to avoid falling into the trap of predictability?

Most topics that the students will find in the news have broad areas of discussion in which debate is possible. In fact, this exercise asks students to consider topics as debaters do. Taking the hardest, least defensible position actually is easier to write, ultimately more interesting to explore, and gives the writer an advantage over others who are traveling the same well-worn path.

The difficulty, of course, is coming up with the angle. Irwin advises the boys to find something to say in support of Stalin. What arguments could be made that news about O.J. Simpson is more important than election coverage? That a high school education is unnecessary? That laws governing minimum drinking age or driving age are actually not useful? Exploring one such sample topic with the class will help get them in the vein of oppositional thinking. Then, they can look for their own topic to explore.

AFTER THE PLAY



Page 14

Page 14: Pop is the New Literacy

Rationale: In *The History Boys*, the content of Hector’s lessons extends beyond fine arts and literature to include elements of pop culture – movies (*Brief Encounter*, *The Seventh Veil*, *Now Voyager*), songs (Edith Piaf, Gracie Fields, George Formby) and, in one instance, a French improvisation acted out in an imaginary bordello – all bits of “calculated silliness,” another germane component of his anti-education agenda. An important consideration here is the part that pop culture can play in education. This section asks students to consider the value that pop culture plays in history. It is one thing to commemorate presidents and statesmen, but a pop star or a television show?

Exercise: Akthar remarks to Hector that “Pop is the new literacy.” Discuss the meaning of this remark. In what ways is pop culture relevant as history? What might be learned by studying the pop culture of a particular decade? Do students recognize Marilyn Monroe? A teddy bear? 3-D glasses? Poodle skirts? 45s? A peace sign? The Beatles? What other pop culture icons can students identify from the twentieth century? What relevance do these pop culture icons have to students today? Hector’s pop culture references stem mostly from the 1940s and 50s. Does the passage of time make pop culture more valuable, or less?

Exercise: Commemorating the Decade

This last section prepares students for the culminating group project: a Time Capsule. Have students complete the individual brainstorm exercise before arranging them into groups. Composing groups of students with divergent interests will best ensure debate, synthesis and problem-solving. As the groups discuss, they will benefit from further guidance that forces them to consider not only who and what should be preserved (Is the I-Phone a more significant invention than the hybrid automobile?), but also how this is most effectively done. How will the students represent their choices – photograph, news article, video clip, etc.? Even though the group may not be able to produce the actual book or recording, what in their Time Capsule will represent each choice?

Note that not all of the items need to have been created, envisioned or produced after the year 2000, but the choices should best represent the current values of our culture. For example, a book written in 1950 may have important relevance to an event that occurred in 2000. After all, Shakespeare’s plays are still being produced more than four hundred years after they were written because they still speak to our times in some essential way.

Remind students to edit the components to fit within your specified time limit and to determine the most effective order for their presentation.

AFTER THE PLAY



Page 15

Page 15: Resources for Further Study

Many of these resources will help students to prepare the exercises and assignments of the guide. Some allow them to further explore playwright Alan Bennett's writing, British culture or the play itself. Note that a film version of *The History Boys* is available. However, the film differs from the play in some substantial ways, aside from the structure which eliminates the flash forward sequences of the play. Irwin is not permanently disabled in the film and the character of the grown Posner is shown in a light which reflects a very different perspective on Hector's influence.

Optional Exercise: After the students see the play, have them write a letter using one or more of the following elements of writing: Narrative, Descriptive, Expository, Response to Literature or Persuasive. Mail their responses to P.L.A.Y. at the address above.

Evaluation

Please let us know how successful we were in designing the Discovery Guide and these Teaching Instructions. Which parts worked for your class and which didn't? We hope these activities will help to illuminate the theatre-going experience for you and your students. Send your comments along with student responses to:

**CTG's P.L.A.Y.
Attn. Rachel Fain
601 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012**

Close the Quotations

Name: _____

Which teacher in *The History Boys* made each of the following statements?

1. "All knowledge is precious whether or not it serves the slightest human use."
2. "Truth is no more at issue in an examination than thirst at a wine-tasting or fashion at a striptease."
3. "But learn it now, know it now and you'll understand it whenever."
4. "Plainly stated and properly organized facts need no presentation surely."
5. "I count examinations, even for Oxford and Cambridge, as the enemy of education. Which is not to say that I don't regard education as the enemy of education, too."
6. "But this is history. Distance yourselves."
7. "Can you, for a moment, imagine how dispiriting it is to teach five centuries of masculine ineptitude?"
8. "Education isn't something for when they're old and grey and sitting by the fire. It's for now. The exam is next month."
9. "One thing you will learn if you plan to stay in this benighted profession is that the chief enemy of culture in any school is always the Headmaster."
10. "Pass the parcel.
That's sometimes all you can do.
Take it, feel it, pass it on.
Not for me, not for you, but for someone, somewhere, one day."

Commemorating the Decade

Name: _____

WHAT	WHY	HOW
Events 1. 2.		
People 1. 2.		
Objects 1. 2.		
Quotation		
Book		
Movie		
Television program		
Magazine		
Invention or discovery		
Song or piece of music		
Poem		
Visual arts		