

AP[®] ART HISTORY

2014 SCORING GUIDELINES

Question 7

The photograph shown was taken by Dorothea Lange.

Analyze how and why Lange's photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public. (10 minutes)

Background

The question asks students to analyze how and why Dorothea Lange's photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public. The intent of this question is for students to apply skills of formal and contextual analysis to a photograph and to recognize that photographs such as the one shown may be composed with the same degree of intentionality as other works of art.

Migrant Mother, Nipomo Valley, California was taken by Dorothea Lange in 1936 C.E. as part of Lange's work for the Resettlement Administration—later renamed the Farm Security Administration (F.S.A.)—a program run by the United States government between 1935 and 1944 C.E. The F.S.A.'s photographic program, of which Lange was a part, documented the harsh living conditions of the rural poor for the purpose of introducing “America to Americans,” in the words of the F.S.A.'s director Roy Stryker.

The photograph depicts Florence Owens Thompson, a 32-year-old woman in a pea-pickers' camp cradling a baby. Two of her other small children huddle behind her, averting their faces from the camera. Thompson, at this time, was the mother of seven children on the brink of starvation. Lange purposefully composed *Migrant Mother* to reveal the shocking human consequences of poverty and to help generate public sympathy and support for those seeking to overcome destitution during the Great Depression. Much of the image's power comes from the composition's gripping sense of immediacy. Years later, recollecting her experience in taking the photograph, Lange noted that Thompson asked her no questions but simply allowed her to take six increasingly close exposures of her and her family in their makeshift tent. Omitting the tent, trunk, trash, and dirty dishes from this particular photograph, Lange collapsed the distance between subject and viewer in order to emphasize the mother's tense and sorrowful expression, the family's filthy garments, and the baby's smudged face. In so doing, Lange humanized the toll of the Great Depression, thereby urging viewers to end the physical and psychological pain of migrant workers and other displaced families.

The formal composition of *Migrant Mother* has been interpreted as drawing from established religious iconography to endow the rural poor with a sense of dignity in the face of suffering. In this interpretation, the central figure is transformed into a kind of working-class Madonna. Flanked by two small children, the mother cradling a third child anchors the triangular composition, emphasizing a vision of motherhood not unlike the intimacy found in Medieval and Renaissance images of the Virgin Mary, Christ child, and angels. Most likely, Lange drew from these existing artistic conventions as a mean of effectively conveying to the public at large the blameless suffering of the rural poor and the urgent need to act on their behalf.

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Question 7 (continued)

By publishing the photographs in large, national newspapers, the F.S.A. intended to increase public awareness of poverty during the Great Depression and to build support for federal projects. This particular photograph was published in the *San Francisco News* to accompany a story on the plight of destitute agricultural workers in California and to demand relief for them. Reproduced in other media outlets throughout the nation, this photograph, and others from Lange's series on the same family, served to document economic and social distress as well as to advertise the F.S.A.'s efforts to address the plight of agricultural workers. In the broader context of the Great Depression, *Migrant Mother* captures the paralyzing fear that was characteristic of an economically turbulent era while also providing an intimate visual depiction of an impoverished social class. *Migrant Mother* was a clarion call for social reform, to relieve the squalor and degradation of the poor at the time that the photograph was taken.

Two Tasks for Students

1. Analyze how Lange's photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public.
2. Analyze why Lange's photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public.

Points to Remember

This question asks students to combine skills of both formal and contextual analysis. Since students are given the name of the photographer, they should be able to focus their responses on analyzing how and why Lange's photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public.

Students must address the photograph's meaning. If students do not address the meaning that the photograph was intended to convey to a general public, it will be difficult to analyze the photograph in a manner relevant to the question.

The highest score a response can earn that does not address both how and why Lange's photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public is 2 points.

Students are neither given nor asked to provide the date of the photograph. However, students will need to place the photograph within its general political and historical context in order to answer the question. While the most correct responses will address Lange's work for the Farm Security Administration, it is acceptable for students to place the photograph within the context of the Great Depression and/or the economic turmoil of the 1930s more generally.

Students are not asked to provide the title of the photograph, although some students may include such detail in their responses.

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Question 7 (continued)

Scoring Criteria

4 points

Response demonstrates thorough knowledge and understanding of the question.

The response clearly and correctly analyzes how and why Lange’s photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public. The response may include minor errors that do not have a meaningful effect on the analysis.

3 points

Response demonstrates sufficient knowledge and understanding of the question.

The response correctly analyzes how and why Lange’s photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public. However, the response may be somewhat unbalanced—focusing more on either how or why Lange’s photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public, though both are represented—and/or may include minor errors that have some effect on the analysis.

2 points

Response demonstrates some knowledge and understanding of the question.

The response addresses how and why Lange’s photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public, but the discussion is less analytical than descriptive. It may be overly general, simplistic, or unbalanced. For example, the discussion of how Lange’s photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public may be mostly accurate, whereas the discussion of why Lange’s photograph was purposefully composed includes errors that affect the response.

OR

The response correctly analyzes either how or why Lange’s photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public, not both.

NOTE: This is the highest score a response can earn that does not address both how and why Lange’s photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public.

1 point

Response demonstrates little knowledge and understanding of the question.

The response demonstrates some general familiarity with the issues raised by the question by addressing how and/or why Lange’s photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public. However, the response is weak, overly descriptive, and/or contains significant errors.

0 points

Response demonstrates no discernible knowledge or understanding of the question.

The student attempts to respond, but the response makes only incorrect or irrelevant statements. The score of 0 points includes crossed-out words, personal notes and drawings.

— This is a blank paper only.

7. The photograph shown was taken by Dorothea Lange.

Analyze how and why Lange's photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public.
(10 minutes)

Lange's photograph was taken under the Farm Security Administration's photography project which commissioned ~~artists~~ photographers from around the U.S. to take photographs that would promote the ~~ideas~~ New Deal during the Great Depression, during the 30s. In this photograph, Lange captures the emotion of the Great Depression in the careworn look on the mother's face. Her wrinkled, ~~lean~~ furrowed brow and off-in-the distance gaze, combined with the gesture of her finger touching the corner of her mouth, evoke feelings of uncertainty and distress ~~and sorrow~~ as she and her children move into the future. Her children, dirty dressed in tattered clothing, and nestling into her side protectively, are an image of ^{deep} sadness and dependence, only highlighted by the dismal and ambiguous background. In the subject's eyes, Lange captures the weathered, beaten-down, ~~but still-creating~~ hope for the future. ~~and~~ This image would have evoked sympathy—especially because of the children's inclusion—and roused support for the New Deal's efforts to ~~create public~~ support the people struggling in the U.S. and future generations of Americans.

7. The photograph shown was taken by Dorothea Lange.

Analyze how and why Lange's photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public.
(10 minutes)

Dorothea Lange's photograph of a Native American mother and her children taken during the Great Depression time period is composed to extract emotions from the viewer and force them (as well as the government) to consider the situations of others. A worried-looking mother can be seen ~~look~~ staring ahead as 2 children clutch onto her, hiding their faces, and a sleeping baby rests in her hands. There is no background that can be seen, making the photograph more relatable to the general public, as the woman pictured could be anyone. What most strongly conveys meaning to a general audience here, however, is the black and white color of the photograph. In choosing to eliminate color, everything becomes more vivid and clear, free from distraction. The wrinkles on the woman's forehead become more pronounced, as does her downturned mouth and look of panic in her eyes. The dirt on the baby's face and clothing seem to jump out at the viewer, indicating a family in crisis and need. These qualities all combine to create an image of someone, anonymous, but completely similar at the same time. The woman is no one, but she is also a neighbor, a friend, a parent. She is able to be easily identified with, which forces self-reflection, but also curiosity at who she is and how she and her family can be helped, as she is quite clearly struggling, overwhelmed, and scared.

WMP
FFC

7C

7. The photograph shown was taken by Dorothea Lange.

Analyze how and why Lange's photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public.
(10 minutes)

Dorothea Lange's photograph depicts a worried mother during the Great Depression in America, ca. 1930. This piece was a transition into the world of photography and has been made iconic as encapsulating the toughness of the Depression, especially on families. The composition of the piece puts the mother's wrinkling, worried face directly in the middle, and thus ~~puts~~^{puts} the viewer's focus on her face. ~~By~~ By emphasizing and focusing on the woman's face, Lange conveys ~~the~~ the ~~the~~ worry, ~~the~~ fear, and struggle of the Depression to the general public. The surrounding children holding on to the mother is another aspect of this photo's composition that conveys further meaning; that people were tied down by and struggling to provide for their children. The purposeful composition of this piece puts the viewer's direct focus on the mother's burdened face, ~~the~~ as well as ~~the~~ her numerous, surrounding children she struggles to provide for. The meaning Lange hopes to convey to the general public is a feeling of worry, fear, and struggle.

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2014 SCORING COMMENTARY

Question 7

Overview

This 10-minute question asked students to analyze how and why Dorothea Lange's photograph was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public. The intent of this question was for students to apply skills of formal and contextual analysis to a photograph and to recognize that photographs, such as the one shown, may be composed with the same degree of intentionality as other works of art.

Sample: 7A

Score: 4

The response clearly and correctly analyzes how and why Dorothea Lange's photograph *Migrant Mother* was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public. The response asserts that Lange's photograph was "taken under the Farm Security Administration's photography project ... [to] promote the New Deal during the Great Depression during the 30s." The response then discusses formal elements to support how Lange's photograph is composed to convey meaning: "the gesture of her finger touching the corner of her mouth, emot[e]s feelings of uncertainty and distress." The compositional elements are further illustrated by the statement that the children are shown "nestling into her side protectively ... highlighted by the dismal and ambiguous background." The response ends by stating that the photograph "evoked sympathy" and "roused support for the New Deal's efforts." In this way, the response demonstrates thorough knowledge and understanding of the question.

Sample: 7B

Score: 3

The response correctly analyzes how and why Lange's photograph *Migrant Mother* was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public. The response indicates that Lange's photograph was composed with the intention to "extract emotions from the viewer and force them (as well as the government) to consider the situations of others." The response discusses compositional elements, stating that the children are "hiding their faces" and that there is "no background that can be seen, making the photograph more relatable to the general public." Although there is a fair amount of description that does not contribute to the analysis, the response concludes by noting correctly that Lange's subject was a mother figure who could be "easily identified with" and who could be "helped." In this way, the response demonstrates sufficient knowledge and understanding of the question.

Sample: 7C

Score: 2

The response correctly analyzes how Lange's photograph *Migrant Mother* was purposefully composed to convey meaning to a general public. The response correctly states that Lange's photograph was taken "during the Great Depression in America, ca. 1930." The response describes how the mother's face is "directly in the middle," which "puts the viewer's focus on her face." The statement that there is a "direct focus" on "the mother's burdened face" is reiterated at the end of the response, thereby making the same point twice. The response further identifies the "surrounding children holding on to the mother" as another compositional element that "conveys the worry, fear, and struggle of the Depression to the general public." The response, however, is overly general, with no real discussion of why Lange might have composed the photograph "to convey ... worry, fear, and struggle." In this way, the response demonstrates only some knowledge and understanding of the question.