

[MoMA lesson plan on Abstract Expressionism](#)

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The Museum of Modern Art hosts many educational resources on their website. The first stop is the main [MoMA learning page](#), but I have found more useful ideas on the “[Tools and Tips](#)” part of the site where the museum has posted slideshows and worksheets for educator use. The content level of these varies, but I have found many (like the activity below), can be adapted for an introductory art history survey. In the activity below, students look carefully at a work by Jackson Pollock and a work by Helen Frankenthaler and spend some time developing language to describe these and respond to them. I like to use this as the very beginning of the class in which I teach Abstract Expressionism, because it allows students to look carefully at these works and practicing translating these visual experiences into language, finding their own words to engage with them before being “taught” them. Some students will still dislike Abstract Expressionism, but students are often pleasantly surprised by what kind of ideas and observations they are able to generate about work that seems totally opaque to them at first.

Learning goals:

After completion of this assignment, students will be able to:

- Develop varied language to describe and analyze abstract works of art.
- Apply this language in verbal and/or written comparisons.

Activity (about 15 minutes):

- As an informal writing assignment to begin a class on Abstract Expressionism, first, project an image of Jackson Pollock’s *One: Number 31, 1950* (1950) on the screen with the directions: “Look carefully at this work. Write a list of words that describe the work. Try to include nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs” (c. 5 mins)
- Second, project Helen Frankenthaler’s *Jacob’s Ladder* (1957) with the same directions. (c. 5 mins)
- Then, with both images on the screen, instruct students to “Compare and contrast these two works of art, using some of the words from your list. What is similar about these works? What is different? Think about line, color, composition, etc.” (c. 5-10 minutes). This part of the activity could be run as a full class discussion, a discussion in groups, or more informal writing.