

A Veteran Teacher's Lessons – Student Art to Tell the Story

Student art is a great way to have students show what they know about a social studies concept or history event. Not every student will be a talented artist, but you can design art assignments for the whole class enhancing your class content. In addition, you can make student art one option when doing larger projects.

I introduced an art assignment early in my US History class. When we studied the Mexican American War, I had all students do a visual representation of the events leading to the war. I began by giving them some historical background on the event with the [Mexican American War slideshow](#). As students took notes on the [Mexican American War Organizer](#), I had students add symbols to go with the notes. For example, with their notes on Anglo settlement in northern Mexico in the 1820's, students might draw a long horn steer to represent settlers desire to raise cattle. When the notes and symbols were complete, students received [a page to draw their visual representations](#) of the Mexican American War, along with colored pencils.

What you will really enjoy in an art project like this is to see all the different and creative ways students tackle the assignment. For example, one student created a [collage of images](#), including a map of the newly acquired US territories the result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Another student drew a [political cartoon](#) showing Uncle Sam and a representative of Mexico pulling in opposite directions on the horns of a long horn steer, representing the Texas territory. I always explain to students that they aren't being graded on their artistic abilities, but on their uses of symbols and their [written explanation of their visual](#). Look at the [Student Art Gallery of Mexican American War Visuals](#) and you'll see that art is a powerful way for students to show what they know

Some art assignments are for the whole class, but you can also make student art an option when you are working on projects. During our unit on immigration I had groups of students research the experiences of various immigrant groups, and I gave students a variety of options for telling their stories. Some students made videos, others slideshows; Phil and Jessa decided to make an original illustrated book, entitled, [The Italian American Family: A Family's Struggle In a New Land](#). Once they did their research on Italian immigration, they used paper, pencils and paint to tell their story. You can see all the images from their [book in the Italian American immigration](#).

During our unit on the New Deal, students viewed pieces of public art made by artists employed in the Federal Arts Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). I thought this would be a good chance to have my students make their own art, a poster for one of the Roosevelt New Deal programs. In the [Alphabet Soup Poster assignment](#), the prompt said, "Use the area below to design a poster/handbill for one of the Alphabet Soup programs. Be sure to include the initials of the program, along with symbols showing what the program was designed to do. Be creative, neat, and use color in your poster." After students researched and made their poster, their job was to, "Write a paragraph explaining your poster. Be sure to tell what the agency did, and point out the symbols, colors, and figures that you used to communicate this idea." You can see examples of their efforts in the [Alphabet Soup Poster Gallery](#).

The 1960's was a decade of protest. We studied the struggle of the United Farmworkers (UFW) led by Cesar Chavez. In the [Cesar Chavez slideshow](#) I included artwork designed by and for the farmworkers, especially the 1968 grape boycott. After students learned about the UFW's fight for unionization, I asked students to design a piece of protest art. I created a templates, allowing students to decorate a [picket sign](#), [flag](#), [button](#), or [bumper sticker](#). You can see the results in the [UFW Protest Art Gallery](#) made by my students.

When you find a talented artist, encourage him or her to create a piece of art symbolizing the historical period or contemporary event you are studying. Student art is a poignant and powerful way for students to illustrate the themes of your course. So, build in opportunities for your artists to shine.