



Overview

In this article, Gregory O'Brien describes the life and work of John Pule, a well-known Pasifika artist and poet. He tells the story of John's development as an internationally acclaimed artist (from winning an art competition at the age of nine to a life-changing return to Niue over twenty years later). The author often uses figurative language to describe John's life. The story does not follow a chronological pattern as it shifts from John's present projects to his early life and then jumps forward again to describe his inspirations, dreams, and beliefs. However, paragraphs are short and clearly linked with subheadings.

John's art accompanies the text, allowing students to access his work.

An image of a famous painting by Paul Gauguin *Where do we come from?*

What are we? Where are we going? is also included, as John was inspired by this work. However, the depiction of a semi-naked young woman may need sensitive treatment with some students.

Texts related by theme

"Any Old Iron: The Art of Jeff Thomson" SJSL L3 2011 | "Early Artists of Aotearoa" SJ 4.1.05 | "Wired" SJ 3.3.08

Text characteristics from the year 7 reading standard

metaphor, analogy, and connotative language that is open to interpretation

sentences that vary in length, including long, complex sentences that contain a lot of information

JOHN PULE **ARTIST OF THE PACIFIC** BY Gregory O'Brien*

JOHN PULE'S PAINTINGS AND POEMS are songs of the Pacific. They tell the stories of the people who live there or pass through it.

The sea is never far from the centre of John Pule's work.

In 2011, he sailed from Auckland to Tonga with a group of artists who had been asked to make art inspired by the pristine waters of the Kermadec Islands. John was in his element. He sat for hours on the deck of HMNZS *Otago*, staring at the horizon, not saying or doing much. He was simply soaking up the non-stop energy and presence of the ocean.

When he returned to his studio in Auckland a week later, he immediately set to work painting a series of huge, powerful images, including *The Home and the World*.

This photograph of John tells us a lot about him – and his art. With his eyes firmly closed, John is a dreamer. He sees beyond the ordinary. The shell in his mouth represents the life-force of the sea – and also the music you hear when you hold a shell to your ear. The cord on his forehead is a koru, an infinity spiral, a coiled snake ... It joins the thoughts and dreams in his head with his oceanic song.

* Gregory O'Brien was one of the artists who travelled to the Kermadec Islands with John Pule in 2011.

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complex layers of meaning, and/or information that is irrelevant to the identified purpose for reading, (that is, competing information), requiring students to infer meanings or make judgments

elements that require interpretation, such as complex plots, sophisticated themes, and abstract ideas

Possible curriculum contexts

THE ARTS (Visual Arts)

Level 4 – Investigate the purposes of objects and images from past and present cultures and identify the contexts in which they were or are made, viewed, and valued.

ENGLISH (Reading)

Level 4 – Language features: Show an increasing understanding of how language features are used for effect within and across texts.

ENGLISH (Writing)

Level 4 – Language features: Use a range of language features appropriately, showing an understanding of their effects.

Possible reading purposes

- To find out what inspires and motivates a famous New Zealand artist
- To explore purposes for creating works of art
- To consider how artists connect their cultural values and beliefs with their art.

See [Instructional focus – Reading](#) for illustrations of some of these reading purposes.

Possible writing purposes

- To report on the life and work of a well-known artist – present or past
- To describe and interpret an artwork
- To describe the process of creating an artwork.

See [Instructional focus – Writing](#) for illustrations of some of these writing purposes.

Text and language challenges

VOCABULARY:

- Possible unfamiliar words and phrases, including “pristine”, “resuscitation”, “acknowledges”, “clambering”, “things we hold dear”, “burdens”, “inspired”, “represents”
- Proper nouns, including “Kermadec Islands”, “HMNZS *Otago*”, “Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit”
- Phrasal verbs and collocations, including “soaking up”, “gridded up”, “life-force”, “non-stop”, “well-known”, “wave-like”, “set to work”.

Possible supporting strategies

Some explanation may be needed of the title HMNZS *Otago* and of the award. Both of these represent New Zealand’s connection with Great Britain, and some students may need this background information.

Before reading, focus on the collocations and explore their meanings. Discuss the context to build an understanding of what they might mean and point out that the individual words can have different meanings.

Select key vocabulary that students will need to know. Plan activities to introduce this key vocabulary before reading and activities to practise it after reading. Refer to *The English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction*, pages 39–46, for information about learning vocabulary.

SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED:

- Knowledge of the work of John Pule
- Knowledge of the work of New Zealand artists
- Knowledge of different styles and types of art
- Knowledge of Pasifika art
- Understanding of how artists interpret the world through their art.

Possible supporting strategies

Explore understandings about why people create art, drawing out that artists express ideas, beliefs, and values and that their cultural knowledge and experiences can have a big influence on their art. You may want to build a context about artists from different cultures and backgrounds. Students may enjoy sharing knowledge about and/or finding out about artists from their own culture. Students who have a first language other than English will benefit from exploring relevant concepts in this language.

TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE:

- Mixture of recount, description, and explanation, all narrated in the third person
- Figurative language, including “John Pule’s paintings and poems are songs of the Pacific”, “in his element”, “span the distance”, “Each painting is like a net thrown into the ocean”, “John wonders what he will catch”, “John Pule inhabits many worlds”, “channelling his energy”, “floodgates opened. A stream of paintings started flowing”
- Mixed time frames and associated range of verb forms, across sections and within paragraphs
- Adverbial time markers, including “at the age of twelve”, “during this time”, “until he was nearly thirty years old”, “During his stay”, “After his return”, “When he was younger”.

Possible supporting strategies

Before reading, lead the students through the text and explain the order of events. Note that the headings do not provide obvious clues of the content, but after students have read the story, return to the headings and explore their meaning and why they were chosen.

The use of figurative language will be challenging for some students. Support them to think about the concrete meaning and then support them to explore how this meaning is extended to the figurative meaning. Before reading, give the students selected phrases and explanations of the concrete meanings and ask them to brainstorm possible figurative meanings. Explain that the words create an image or an analogy for the reader. Give students time to explore the meaning in pairs, supporting them to use the meaning and context to work them out. Point out that these words may have a different meaning in a different context.

Point out the use of time markers, and show students how they link events and help the reader to follow the story. With some students, particularly ELLs, it may be useful to highlight time markers and discuss their meanings. If appropriate, you could also highlight the main verbs in selected sections and discuss the information that the verb forms and the time markers convey. It may be useful to model this with another short text or with the first couple of paragraphs. Then ask students to do it in pairs with another section. Then have them continue using this method as they read the rest of the article.

Instructional focus – Reading

The Arts (Level 4, Visual Arts: Investigate the purposes of objects and images from past and present cultures and identify the contexts in which they were or are made, viewed, and valued.)

English (Level 4 – Language features: Show an increasing understanding of how language features are used for effect within and across texts.)

Text excerpts from “John Pule: Artist of the Pacific”

The shell in his mouth represents the life-force of the sea ...

John Pule’s paintings and poems are songs of the Pacific.

The sea is never far from the centre of John Pule’s work.

John was in his element. He sat ... staring at the horizon, not saying or doing much. He was simply soaking up the non-stop energy and presence of the ocean.

When he returned to his studio ..., he immediately set to work painting a series of huge, powerful images, including *The Home and the World*.

John is a dreamer. He sees beyond the ordinary.

“Each painting is like a net thrown into the ocean.”

Like the ocean, many of John’s paintings contain currents and wave-like patterns. Other works are gridded up like maps, diagrams, or calendars.

Like Gauguin, John asks questions. His art resembles a riddle or a puzzle.

What do we love most in the world? What are we afraid of? What do we believe in?

“Everything I paint or write leads back to the Pacific ...”

John didn’t return to Niue until he was nearly thirty years old ...

After his return to Auckland ...

“As well as the objects ...”

It joins the thoughts ...

Students (what they might do)

The students discuss the expression “songs of the Pacific” and form hypotheses about its meaning, which they return to throughout their reading of the text.

They think critically about the sentence that he was “staring ... not saying or doing much, soaking up ...” to infer that sometimes what looks like nothing can also mean that something important is happening.

The students integrate several descriptions and pieces of information to infer that the sea is a strong influence and motivation in his life and his work.

The students notice the use of figurative language and make connections to what they have already read and to their knowledge of language to infer that John does not plan his art or know how his paintings will turn out.

They ask and answer questions about the statement that John is a dreamer who sees beyond the ordinary and form hypotheses about what this means. They note the reference to Gauguin asking questions and posing riddles and puzzles and make inferences that like Gauguin, John Pule is trying to make sense of the world through his art.

The students reread specific parts of the text, integrating information from John’s references to the Pacific and the description of his energy for painting after his return to Niue to infer that this return to his cultural roots that inspired him to paint again.

Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

DIRECT the students to discuss the first sentence.

- Think about what you know about figurative language. What does “songs of the Pacific” mean. Why do you think the author wrote it this way?

PROMPT the students to visualise John Pule on the ship.

- Why do you think he wasn’t doing much or saying much? What was he actually doing? What does “soaking up” mean to you? What was he soaking up?

MODEL how to integrate information and make inferences.

- I am wondering why there are several references in this first section to the sea, and if I read and think about each one of these statements, I think that they are telling us something important about what has inspired this artist. Read these specific parts again with your partner and then combine them to work out what you think the writer is telling you.

PROMPT the students to explore and understand the figurative language.

- Think about what we know about John Pule so far.
- Visualise a net being thrown into the ocean. Remember what you know about similes and how “like” is used to compare one thing with another. Talk with your partner about what it might mean.

ASK QUESTIONS to support the students’ understanding.

- Why does John create wave-like patterns and currents, grids, and diagrams?
- What does this tell us about his thoughts, dreams, and questions?
- How would you answer the questions he has posed? Are these things that you wonder about? Or do you ask different questions? Share your thoughts with your partner.

PROMPT the students to use information in the text.

- Why do you think the heading for this section is Concrete Foundations?

Explore what a physical concrete foundation is and extend this to the metaphorical. Link this discussion to the general notion of figurative language.

- Why did his trip to Niue have such a strong influence on him?
- Why does everything John paints or writes lead back to the Pacific?

MODEL and prompt the students to synthesise information.

After reading about John’s experiences and influences from his connection to the sea, his ongoing quest to make sense of his world, and his strong cultural connection to the Pacific, I think there are strong clues about what drives and motivates his art. Reread the caption on the front page with your partner.

- How does this description help us to make sense of other information in the article? How would you describe John Pule?

GIVE FEEDBACK

- You’ve found three pieces of information and combined them to make an inference about John’s search for answers. How could you confirm whether your inference is accurate?

METACOGNITION

- Share with your partner what information you combined to make an inference about John Pule’s inspiration.
- What was hard or easy about working out the meanings of the figurative language?
- What questions would you ask the writer and why?

Reading standard: by the end of year 7

The Literacy Learning Progressions

Assessment Resource Banks

Instructional focus – Writing

The Arts (Level 4, Visual Arts: Investigate the purposes of objects and images from past and present cultures and identify the contexts in which they were or are made, viewed, and valued.)

English (Level 4 – Language features: Use a range of language features appropriately, showing an understanding of their effects.)

Text excerpts from “John Pule: Artist of the Pacific”

“Each painting is like a net thrown into the ocean.” And each day when he starts work in his studio in Henderson, Auckland, John wonders what he will catch.

He was expelled from school at the age of twelve and again at the age of fourteen.

It was during this time that he started to sketch again ...

During the 1990s, ...

John didn’t return to Niue until he was nearly thirty years old ...

When he was younger ...

In 2011, he sailed from Auckland to Tonga with a group of artists who had been asked to make art inspired by the pristine waters of the Kermadec Islands.

Examples of text characteristics

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

When writers describe something by comparing it with something else, they are using figurative language. Figurative language can create strong visual images for a reader.

ADVERBIAL PHRASES AND CLAUSES SIGNALLING TIME

Phrases signalling time and place provide more precision and help to link chronological events from one paragraph to the next.

ADDING DETAILS

Writers can add details to nouns by adding relative clauses.

METACOGNITION

- Share with your partner the places where you added detail and information and explain why you did it.
- Tell me what you were thinking when you changed your wording from ... to ... What did you want your reader to know?
- What do you need to have in mind when you are choosing figurative language? What influences your choices?
- Why did you add this adverbial? Does it improve your message? Why?

Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

PROMPT the students to notice the impact of figurative language in the text.

- What images came to your mind when you read these examples of figurative language?
- How did those words create that image for you?
- Was it effective? Why? Why not?

PROMPT the students to use figurative language in their own writing.

- Talk with your writing partner and discuss places where figurative language will enhance your descriptions.
- How will you write it?

For some students, particularly ELLs, the use of figurative language could be confusing. Provide sentence starters, or a framework for innovating, to support the students to develop their own examples of figurative language.

MODEL how writers use adverbial phrases and clauses to provide more precise information.

- Let’s look at all the places where the writer has used small phrases to give us more information about the time – how long something took, the period of time in which something happened, or the order of events. The writer has used different phrases and clauses, such as “at the age of twelve”, “During the 1990s”, and “until he was nearly thirty years old”. “At”, “During”, and “Until” all have different meanings. These phrases and clauses are called adverbials because they add information about the main clause.

PROMPT the students to use adverbials in their own writing.

- Look for places where you are giving your reader a sense of time, place, or age.
- What phrase will you use to make the meaning clearer?

ASK QUESTIONS to support the students to add relative clauses to their writing.

- What information will make your meaning clearer?
- How can you include that in your sentence?

EXPLAIN how to add relative clauses.

- A relative clause adds detail to a noun by providing extra information. It includes a verb but generally does not make complete sense by itself. Sometimes a relative clause begins with that, which, who, or what, but not always.

PROMPT the students to discuss their writing with their peers.

- Read the sentence and then say your sentence again with the new information included.
- What do you need to keep in mind as you add your relative clause?
- Check with your partner to see if your additions are useful.

GIVE FEEDBACK

- You’ve changed your wording so that we know how long the journey took, and I can see another place where you could provide more information about the distance. See if you can find it in the last sentence.
- The two phrases “At the end of the day” and “when the little boy stood up” make your sentences more precise.

 Writing standard: by the end of year 7

 The Literacy Learning Progressions