

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF WESTERN ART

THE ANSCHUTZ COLLECTION

American Museum of Western Art—The Anschutz Collection **Writing the West: Western Syntax**

Warm-Up:

Take a few minutes to look around the Museum. Choose a painting that interests you in some way. Write a letter to that painting. You can start it 'Dear, Mountain,' or 'Dear, Buffalo'. You can write to the painter, or to the time period. You can even write to the Museum of itself. Art is a conversation that needs to be continued. Write a letter and see what shapes up!

The Run-On Sentence:

Pick another painting (or continue on the last one) and try describing it in one or two run-on sentences. Use 'and' as many times as possible. You can also use the words for, so, or, but, nor, yet. These words, too, can create sentences of great length.

Why do this? There's an idea that we will continue to explore called western syntax. Think about the story of how Neal Cassady, who grew up in Denver, met Jack Kerouac from Massachusetts. Simply put, Kerouac needed Cassady's western syntax to write his masterpiece, *On the Road*. Before meeting Cassady, classically-trained Kerouac couldn't access his material properly. What is western syntax; does it even exist? And if it exists, like Kerouac, do you need it, too?

Western Syntax:

A very simple definition of syntax is: the word order of a sentence. One example of how a writer uses word order for her benefit is by having the sentence's final word carry the most weight. (Ex: "Vini, vidi, vici." ~Julius Caesar) But can a region possess a signature syntax?

Choose another painting (or continue on the last). Make a list of the subjects inhabiting that painting. A list of 5-7 will do. Take a moment and notice where these figures are located in the painting. Note not only where they are on the canvas, but also where they are in relation to each other. This ordering of figures is highly intentional. The painter spent valuable resources of time and material fixing this order to the canvas. Before we ask ourselves why the artist chose one order versus another, let's write a scene. Take your list of objects and use it to write a scene similar to the one shown in the painting. However, in your scene reorder the objects. Create different pairings than what are shown in the painting. In short, rewrite the pattern.

What was your strategy? That is, what was the syntax you deployed? Could the syntax you chose pertain in any way to you living in Denver, in the West, and writing from a painting while at the Museum? Inquiring minds want to know....