



The Humanities and Creative Expression

What Are the Humanities?

The humanities bring together a variety of disciplines, including history, cultural studies, science, and the arts. Rather than focusing on each area separately, the humanities draw on these disciplines to understand how individuals and cultures make meaning through creative expression. To *make meaning* is to come to an understanding of something. Experiencing the world through the perspectives of the humanities offers a means of finding and creating meaning within our human experience. Humanities teach us not only about each other but also about ourselves.

Humanities Perspectives

Although the humanities weave these disciplines together, it is useful to have a general understanding of each perspective:

- Historical: events, people, and places in the past
- Cultural: beliefs, values, and practices of a group and society
- Scientific: observable, measurable explanations of phenomena
- Artistic: making, creating, and designing creative works

Disciplines of the humanities include the arts, literature, music, history, philosophy, theology, religion, languages, and media. They are often closely connected with social science subdisciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology, as well as with technology. By using multiple perspectives to examine creative works, we can develop a deeper understanding of ourselves and society.



Creative Expression in the Humanities

Creative expression and creative works are the core of the humanities. *Creative expression* is the act of using the human imagination to convey ideas and emotions through a creative work. A *creative work* expresses ideas, values, and emotions. An individual's thoughts and feelings are influenced by the values of their culture and society.

Because an individual is part of society, they cannot create a work outside of society. Their creative work will always be shaped by their experience of their society and culture. A creative work will represent what is important to the culture and/or the creator. In this way, creators show us our world and help us see it differently.

A creator uses their ability to create as a way to relate experiences to their audience by shining a light on what they want others to see. The topics for creative expression can be whatever the creator wants to bring attention to.

It is important to note that a creative work may or may not have an audience. Consider the saying, "If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?" Some would say yes, because sound is created by vibrations that would be generated by the movement of the tree. Likewise, if a person writes a poem that she keeps in a private journal, this is still creative expression, even if no one reads it. Her poem is created by words that are generated by her thoughts and emotions.

Humanities Subject Areas

When you hear the words *art* and *artist*, what comes to mind? Some may picture street art on the wall of a building and an artist with a box of spray cans. Some people may get an image of a stage with a band or dancers. Others may think of a spoken-word poet. There are essentially three primary subject areas for creative expression within the humanities: visual art, performing arts, and literature. Each subject area has characteristics that relate to the experience of the creator and audience. Within each of these subject areas are different artistic forms.

In academia, a subject area is a broad category of knowledge, such as science or the arts. An artistic form, or what is also known as a discipline, is a more specific field within that area, like theater (within the performing arts) or film (within the visual arts).

Subject Area	Characteristics	Experience	Types
Visual Arts	Two-dimensional Three-dimensional	Visual Tactile	Painting, drawing, sculpture, pottery, print, textiles, mixed media, installations, architecture, photography, film, videos
Performing Arts	Temporal	Visual Auditory	Theater, opera, dance, music, magic, pantomime
Literary Arts	Written text, language based	Visual Auditory	Novels, short stories, poems, play scripts, screenplays, song lyrics

1. Visual art is a two-dimensional or three-dimensional creative work that is typically experienced visually (sight) and/or tactilely (touch).

- Types of two-dimensional visual art are painting, drawing, print, photography, film, and video.
 - Film can seem like a performing art, since actors perform in these works. However, the director uses visuals to guide the story and how you perceive it.
- Types of three-dimensional visual art are sculpture, pottery, textiles, mixed media, installations, and architecture.
 - *Textiles* are tapestries, quilts, and clothing.
 - *Mixed media*, such as collage, combines media such as paint, paper, and objects.
 - *Installations* are created by an artist and then put up in an exhibition space where visitors can usually move within the creative work.
 - *Architecture* refers to the design of buildings and can include the building itself.

You may not think of a building as visual art, however architecture is also creative expression reflecting the stylistic and practical values of a culture.

2. Performing arts are temporal creative works that are experienced visually and/or auditorily. *Temporal* refers to existing in time; even if the work is recorded, it begins and ends.

- *Theater performances* are plays with spoken dialogue, with or without music and dance.
- *Operas* are similar to plays, but all of the dialogue is sung by the performers. Opera may include dance.
- *Dance performances* are choreographed movements and usually do not include singing or speaking.
- *Music* may be performed live or recorded.
- Types of performance art include plays, musicals, operas, dance, and music.



3. Literature is a language-based creative work of written text that is experienced visually or auditorily.

- A *novel* may be read aloud and recorded to be listened to through headphones, but it is still written and language based.
- A *poem* may be recited, but the poem itself was written by a poet.
- *Scripts* and *lyrics* may be performed, but the written words are a literary work.
- Types of literature are novels, short stories, poems, play scripts, screenplays, and song lyrics.

Creative expression happens across each of these humanities subject areas and enables people to make sense of ideas that have cultural value for the creator and the audience.

Experiencing Creative Expression

You experience creative expression all around you, wherever you are in society. Visual

arts, performing arts, and literature are found not only in museums and galleries but also on stage, on screens, in libraries, or at bookstores. Any place there is evidence of culture, you can find a creative work.

Take a moment to use your senses to become aware of your surroundings and notice a creative work you are experiencing right now. Consider whether the subject area for the work is an example of visual art, performing art, or literature. Allow yourself to get curious about the creative work. The journalistic questions of *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how* are helpful to start. Then, pay attention to your reaction to the work—what the work makes you think and feel—and reflect on the thoughts and emotions that the creative work inspires in you.

This is where your interpretation of the creative work and the creator’s message for the work intersect. Exploring that intersection is where cultural inquiry begins. *Cultural inquiry* is a method for understanding the message and impact of an experience. The cultural inquiry of creative expression allows us to make sense of our own identities and the world around us.



Relationship Between Humanities and Society

The creative works of the humanities enrich our lives in many ways. Sometimes we feel in awe of the creativity of our fellow humans, and sometimes we feel inspired to create ourselves. Sometimes we feel more strongly connected to other people who are a part of our experience of the creative work.

The relationship between humanities, the self, and society is the focus of this course. The humanities can help us better understand complex societal issues and deepen our understanding of how we are a part of the social fabric that connects us to these issues. As Danielle Brazell of the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs (n.d.) writes, “Arts

and culture lift our souls, affirm our identity, create a sense of belonging, and develop



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