

# Digital Citizenship: Arts Integrated Lessons

## Lesson Title: Selfies: Artistic or Narcissistic?

### Grade Level: High School



#### Essential Question:

Why do we take selfies?

#### Materials

- Examples of selfies
- An example of a painted self-portrait
- Copies of the article “Why Selfies Matter” by Alexandra Sifferlin for TIME
- A cell phone to take selfies

#### Discussion Guideline

1. Begin the discussion with the word selfie. Of course, today we are familiar with the word/term selfies. It is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website.” In 2013 Oxford Dictionaries had named selfie its word of the year, when researchers determined that its frequency in the English language had increased by 17,000% in the previous year.
2. Ask students about their “selfies” habits.
  - Do they take a lot of selfies or a few? Why or why not?
  - How much do you share your selfies? On what platforms? Why?
  - What are the best and the worst kind of selfies? Why?
  - What is the difference between taking a selfie to express a thought or an idea and using text or talking? Why?
  - How do you explain taking selfies to a person who does not take selfies? Why doesn't that person take selfies?
3. Review the four (4) categories for examining a photograph:
  - **Composition:** What do we see in the picture? What don't we see in the picture? Consider things such as details of faces, blurred street signs, parts of objects out of the frame, etc.
  - **Timeframe:** What is the moment being captured? Consider things such as events, points in relationships, etc.
  - **Setting:** What is the location? How is the location made clear?
  - **Focal point:** Where is our attention drawn? How does the artist draw our eye to that point?

4. Review the definitions of explicit and implicit interpretations:
  - **Explicit:** the photograph clearly communicates who, what, when, and where.
  - **Implicit:** the viewers make assumptions about who, what, when, and where.
5. Show one of the examples of a selfie. Analyze the photo for the explicit and implicit interpretations of the photo.
6. Show a self-portrait (use one provided or another of your own choosing). Ask students to compare and contrast the selfie to the self-portrait. Which is art? Why? Which is more socially acceptable? Why?
7. Distribute copies of the article “Why Selfies Matter” by Alexandra Sifferlin for TIME and have students read the article with a partner and look for ways the people in the article interpret selfies explicitly and implicitly. They should also be prepared to discuss the ways experts currently look at and think about selfies.
8. Discuss their findings as a group and challenge students to think about why they take selfies.

## Conclusion

Ask students to take out their phones and take a selfie. How do they choose to take that selfie? Is it a solo or group selfie? What does that say? How might they use that selfie? Why do we take selfies?

# Article: Why Selfies Matter

By Alexandra Sifferlin, [TIME](#) Sept. 06, 2013

**Whether it's the duckface smirk or the coyly suggestive close-up, selfies are a mainstay of Twitter and Instagram and have parents and psychologists wringing their hands over what they "mean."**

Some social scientists lump the selfie trend — which is most popular among younger social media users — into the larger narcissism that they say is more prevalent among today's preteens and adolescents, arguing that the self-portraits are an extension of their self-absorption, while others view it as nothing more than an outlet for self-expression, which just happens to be shared more publicly via the communication mode of our times — social media.

But how aware are young children, or even teens, about the impression that their selfies leave? Do they appreciate that with their likenesses, they are often sending strong visual messages — some even suggestive — that they might not want conveyed?

Dr. Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychology Research Center, believes that parents and experts are over-analyzing the selfie. First, she says, they aren't really that new. As she points out in her column for *Psychology Today*, the term selfie was defined in *UrbanDictionary.com* in 2005. But now that more people have cell phones with cameras, they're just more prevalent.

"The way kids think about technology, media and communication is much different than people even 10 years their senior," she says. "Technology is changing so fast that even small generational gaps are meaningful in how we view 'normal.'"

Developmentally, selfies make sense for children and teens. And for the most part, they are simply reflections of their self-exploration and nothing more. "Self captured images allow young adults and teens to express their mood states and share important experiences," says Dr. Andrea Letamendi, a clinical psychologist and research fellow at UCLA. As tweens and teens try to form their identity, selfies serve as a way to test how they look, and therefore feel, in certain outfits, make-up, poses and places. And because they live in a digital world, self-portraits provide a way of participating and affiliating with that world.

But even though taking selfies is a part of growing up digital, that doesn't mean all self-portraits are okay. Like all behaviors that children and teens test out, parents should help them to learn the limits and guidelines for which types of pictures are acceptable and which are not. It's not likely that pre-teens and even adolescents think beyond seeing the images as a type of developmental skin that they try on and shed, for example, but they do need to be aware that their actions may have consequences. "Kids only have awareness within the context of their experience. Expecting teens to understand what something "means" to an adult is about as reasonable as expecting an adult to understand what it means to the teen," says Rutledge.

That includes whether others will perceive the pictures as suggestive or too indulgent. Rutledge says that it's important for mom and dad to remember that finding and establishing this threshold of appropriateness may be particularly challenging since it could be different for each adolescent. But such discussions are likely the most positive way to solve the issue — explaining to a child what "questionable" selfies are — why it's not acceptable to send out a sexually suggestive picture — is more constructive than blocking their Facebook account or taking away their phone, she says.

But increasingly, other experts say that selfies can also be a window into deeper adolescent issues. With Facebook becoming a prominent resource in young people's therapy sessions, they could provide a useful jumping off point for addressing a teen's or young adult's self-perceptions. In cases where the patients find it hard to open up about issues, selfies could be a way for therapists to break the ice and start a dialogue about what the teen was feeling when the self-portrait was taken, or why he snapped the picture in the first place. "Scientific studies are gathering more information about the use of social media to help professionals recognize these as avenues to identify, support, and help young folks who may otherwise not receive this kind of attention," says Letamendi. "Psychologically speaking, there may be some benefit to participating in sharing selfies because this practice is interwoven in our social culture and is a way to interact socially with others."

Even apart from situations where selfies can inform emotional or behavioral problems, for example, the material that children and adolescents view online — selfies included — can be influential in molding their sense of self. Research has shown that adults make emotional connections to what they see posted online, and that their behaviors and decisions are influenced by how peers in their social network are interacting. People often feel envy, loneliness and generally worse about themselves after perusing their friends' party pictures, for instance, and the latest research, published this week in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, suggests that teens are more likely to engage in risky activities like smoking and drinking if they see their friends doing it in photos.

That's not surprising, given the ubiquity of social media influences in our lives. But it's worth studying, those in adolescent development say, to better understand how these social contributors are shaping the next generation, for better or worse.

Read the entire article, ['Why Selfies Matter' by Alexandra Sifferlin at TIME 2013](#)





