

## NORTON SIMON MUSEUM

### ART-MAKING ACTIVITY: MAKE A SKETCHBOOK JOURNAL

#### GRADES 6-12

#### Objective

Learn how Vincent van Gogh communicated with his friends and family by writing letters that recorded his feelings and his paintings. Then create a sketchbook journal to chronicle your days with writings and sketches.

#### Background

Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890) was a **Post-Impressionist** painter known for his vibrant colors and thick, expressive brushstrokes. Although he suffered from delicate mental health and experienced nervous breakdowns, he was much more than his illness. In his short career of 10 years, Van Gogh created nearly 900 paintings and more than 1,100 works on paper. He wanted people to say of his work, “That man feels deeply, and that man feels subtly.”

Before he decided to become an artist at age 27, Van Gogh tried unsuccessfully to build a career as an art dealer, teacher, bookseller and preacher. As he pursued these various careers, he lived in many places. Wherever he was, he would send his brother Theo, an art dealer himself, letters that often included sketches of what he had seen.

Recognizing his brother’s talent, Theo encouraged Van Gogh to focus on his drawing, and this encouragement inspired him to dedicate his life to becoming an artist. He was mostly self-taught, copying prints and learning from drawing manuals and a variety of books.

In his early work, Van Gogh used a dark **color palette** that echoed the earth tilled by the rural laborers he was depicting. He felt both a deep respect and empathy toward these workers. In 1885, he wrote to Theo, “I have tried to make it clear how those people, eating their potatoes under the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labor, and how they have honestly earned their food.”

When Van Gogh moved to France a year later, the country’s light, color and art inspired him to incorporate more color into his paintings. He eventually developed his signature style of vibrant colors and short brushstrokes. He wrote to Theo, “What color is in a picture, enthusiasm is in life.” Through Van Gogh’s letters, we get a glimpse into the artist’s mind, feelings and artistic process.

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## Discussion

- How would you compare the style and palette of the *Mulberry Tree* with that of *Head of a Peasant Woman in a White Bonnet* on the activity page? Why do you think Van Gogh chose to use such different colors and styles? What do they communicate about the subjects and Van Gogh's feelings about them when he painted them?

## Vocabulary

- **Color palette:** the range of colors used in a particular painting.
- **Post-Impressionism:** an art movement that originated in France in the late 1800s in reaction against the naturalism of Impressionism. Post-Impressionist artists emphasized symbolic content, formal order and structure.

## Images of works referenced in this activity lesson

[The Mulberry Tree](#)

[The Potato Eaters](#)

[Head of a Peasant Woman in a White Bonnet](#)

[Letter 824 from Van Gogh to Theo](#)

[Letter 489 from Van Gogh to Theo](#)

## Van Gogh resources from the Norton Simon Museum

[Works by Van Gogh in the Collection](#)

[Highlights Curriculum Guide: \*Portrait of a Peasant \(Patience Escalier\)\*](#)

[Elements of Art Curriculum Guide: \*The Mulberry Tree\*](#)

[Podcast: Van Gogh's \*Self-Portrait\*, 1889, on Loan from the National Gallery of Art, Washington](#)

[Podcast: Van Gogh's \*Bedroom\* on Loan from the Art Institute of Chicago](#)

[Lecture: From Unrecognized Genius to Global Icon: Vincent van Gogh Then and Now](#)

[Lecture: Van Gogh's "Bedrooms": Making and Meaning](#)

## Van Gogh resources from other institutions

[Van Gogh Museum](#)

[Van Gogh's Letters](#)

[Unravel Van Gogh \(view details of Van Gogh's work\)](#)

[MOMA's exhibition \*Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night\*](#)

[The MET: Van Gogh Biography](#)

## **Books, letters and quotes**

[The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh](#)

[Vincent and Theo](#)

[Van Gogh Museum Book Club](#) (includes pdfs)

[The National Gallery: Teaching Packet](#) (includes a list of books and films)

[Quotes from Van Gogh's Letters](#)

## **Videos**

[Van Gogh Museum](#)

[Smarthistory](#)

[Tate: Van Gogh: Challenging the Myth of the 'Tortured Genius'](#)

## **Activities**

[Van Gogh Museum: Lessons](#)

[Van Gogh Museum: Paint Like Van Gogh](#)

[National Gallery: Self-portrait Activity](#)

## **Curriculum Connections**

### **NATIONAL CORE ART STANDARDS**

- Anchor Standard 1 — Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard 2 — Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard 3 — Refine and complete artistic work.
- Anchor Standard 7 — Perceive and analyze artistic work.

### **CALIFORNIA ART STANDARDS FOR VISUAL ARTS**

- 6.VA: Cr2.1 — Demonstrate openness in trying new ideas, materials, methods, and approaches in making works of art and design.
- Prof.VA: Cr1.2 — Shape an artistic investigation of an aspect of present-day life using a contemporary practice of art or design.

## NORTON SIMON MUSEUM

### MAKE A SKETCHBOOK JOURNAL FOR GRADES 6-12

Van Gogh wrote hundreds of letters to his friends and family that discussed his emotions, beliefs and the paintings that he was working on. Many of these letters also included sketches. In a letter to his brother Theo, he included a sketch of [\*Head of a Peasant Woman in a White Bonnet\*](#) (Sien de Groot), a painting which doubled as a study for his first masterpiece, [\*The Potato Eaters\*](#). Years later, he wrote three times to his brother and sister about [\*The Mulberry Tree\*](#), a painting that he felt was the best of its kind.

Make a sketchbook journal and chronicle your days with writings and sketches. Use the prompts at the end of these instructions to help you get started.

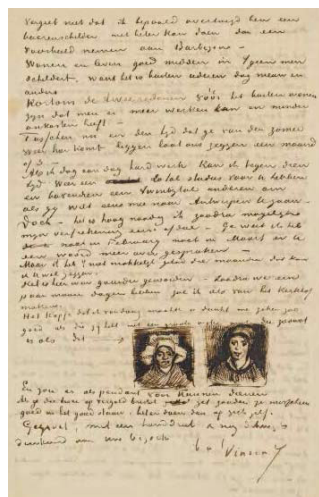
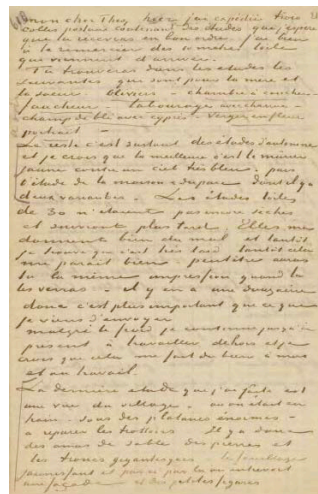


IMAGE CREDITS: Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890):  
TOP ROW LEFT TO RIGHT: *The Mulberry Tree*, October 1889, oil on canvas, Norton Simon Art Foundation, Gift of Mr. Norton Simon; *Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh*, 7 December 1889, pen and ink on paper, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation);  
BOTTOM ROW LEFT TO RIGHT: *Head of a Peasant Woman in a White Bonnet*, 1885, oil on canvas, The Norton Simon Foundation; *Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh with sketches of Head of a Woman and Head of a Woman*, c. 4 April 1885, pen and ink on paper, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation).

## MATERIALS:

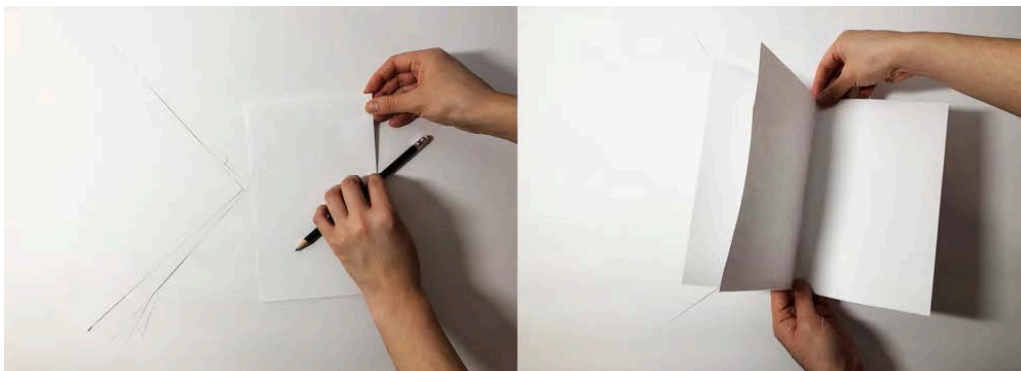


- **Cardstock or thick paper**  
(1 sheet of 9 in. x 12 in.  
trimmed to a 8½ in. x 11½ in.)
- **White paper**  
(5 pieces, 8½ in. x 11 in.)
- **Scissor**
- **String**
- **Needle**
- **Awl** (or other sharp  
tool to poke holes)
- **Collage papers**
- **Glue**
- **Tape**
- **Pencil**

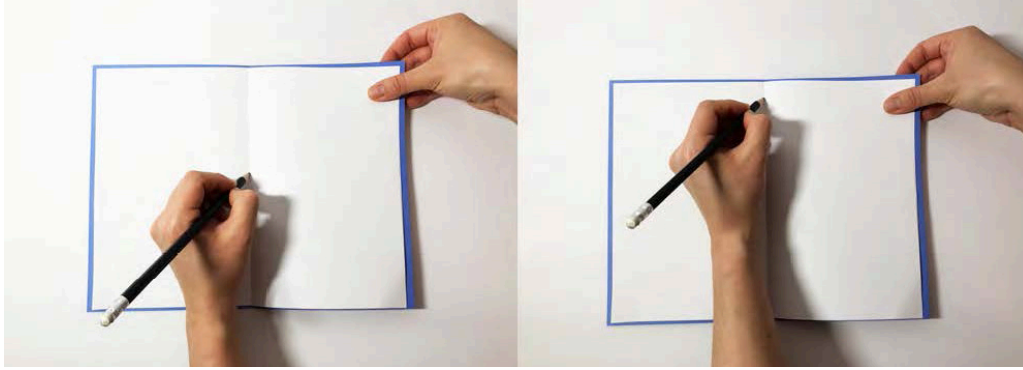
## STEPS:



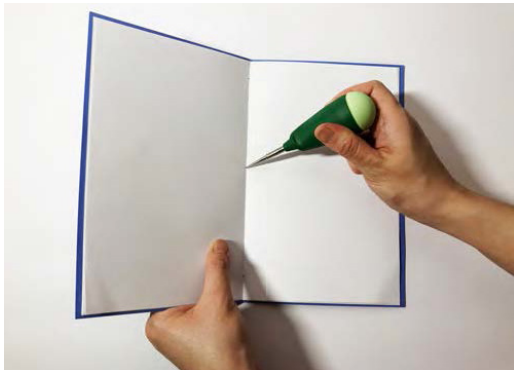
Fold your cardstock in half to make the cover of your sketchbook journal. You can use a pencil to sharpen the crease.



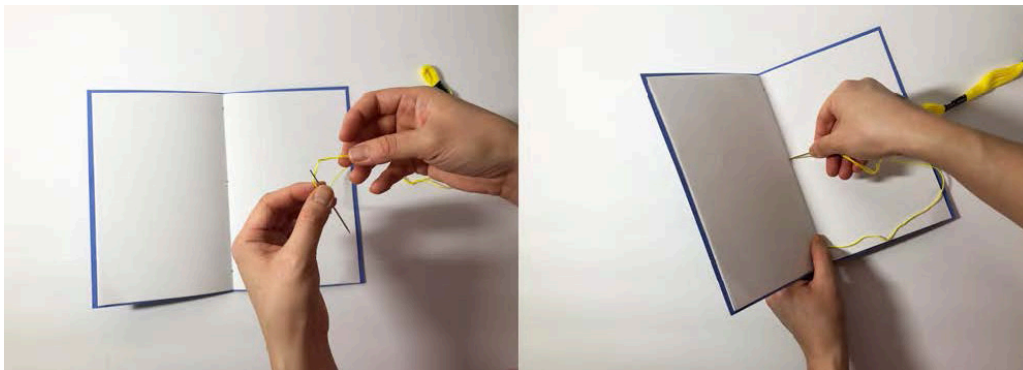
Fold your white pieces of paper in half, one at a time. Nest each folded piece into the other to make the pages of your sketchbook journal.



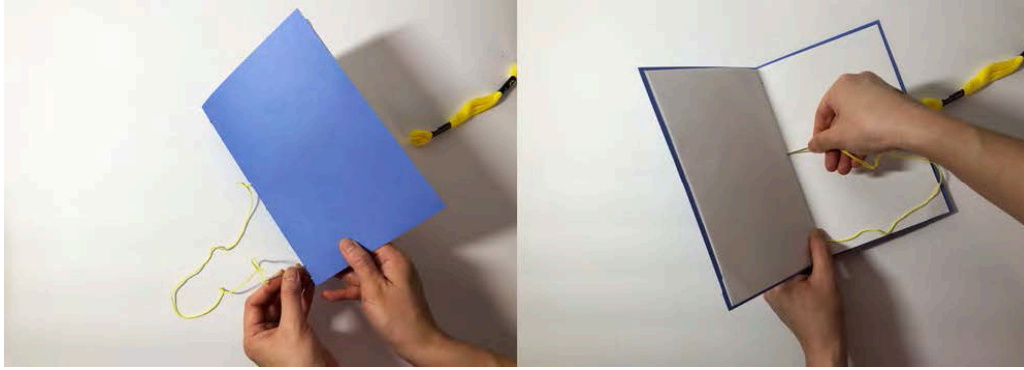
Unfold your cover and center your pages inside the cover. Using a pencil, make a dot in the middle of the page crease. Make another dot about a half an inch from the top and about a half an inch from the bottom.



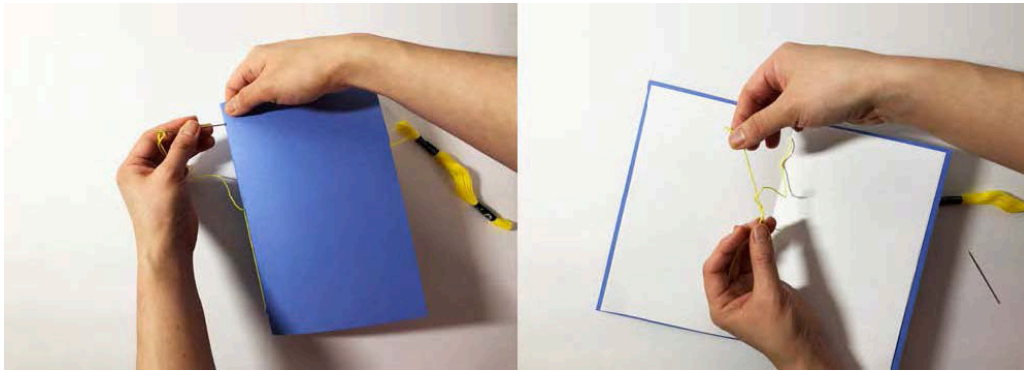
Using an awl or other sharp tool (you can also use a needle to poke through each page and cover), poke a hole through all the pages and the cover where you marked with the dots (middle, top and bottom of the crease).



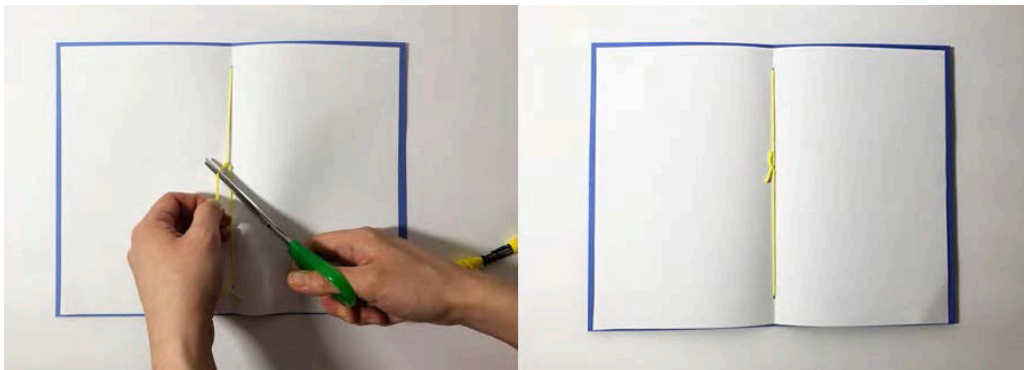
Put your string through your needle and poke the needle and string into the middle hole, leaving out about a few inches of string.



From the outer middle hole, string through the outer bottom hole and back in through the middle hole.



String through the outer top hole and tie the two ends inside your journal, making sure the string is taut.



Cut off the extra string.



Personalize your cover with collage, markers and more!

**Below are prompts that can help you get started on your journal.  
Write and/or sketch your thoughts.**

- What is the most memorable thing that has happened recently?
- What are you feeling right now?
- What do you need right now?
- What challenges are you facing? What are some ways to help overcome these challenges?
- What do you notice about yourself that is different from a few years ago?
- What is something that you are looking forward to?
- What gives you hope?
- What are some things that you are grateful for, big or small?
- When do you feel your best? What are you doing? Where are you?
- Write a letter to your future self about what you are experiencing right now.
- Describe a person that inspires you and why.
- Describe a time when someone complimented you. How did it feel?
- Describe something that you're reading, listening to or watching that inspires you.
- Describe a place that makes you feel happy and safe.
- Describe your perfect day. Be specific.
- Finish this sentence and keep going: I am...
- Finish this sentence and keep going: We are...
- Share some of these prompts with a friend and exchange thoughts as a way to get to better understand each other.