

MoCP

Museum of
Contemporary Photography

Columbia College Chicago

FRAMING IDEAS

Landscape and Place

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This resource is aimed at integrating the study of landscape photography into secondary and post-secondary fine arts, language arts, and social science curriculum. This guide contains, historical information, questions for looking and discussion, classroom activities, and suggested readings related to images from the permanent collection of the MoCP and is aligned with Illinois Learning Standards Incorporating the Common Core and can be adapted for use by younger students. A corresponding set of images for classroom use can be found at www.mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php. Additional images and biographies of the artists featured here can be found on the MoCP's searchable database at <http://www.mocp.org/collection.php>. The MoCP



O. Winston Link

NW 1345—Ghost Town, Stanley, Virginia, January 31, 1957

From the MoCP collection.

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Framing Ideas

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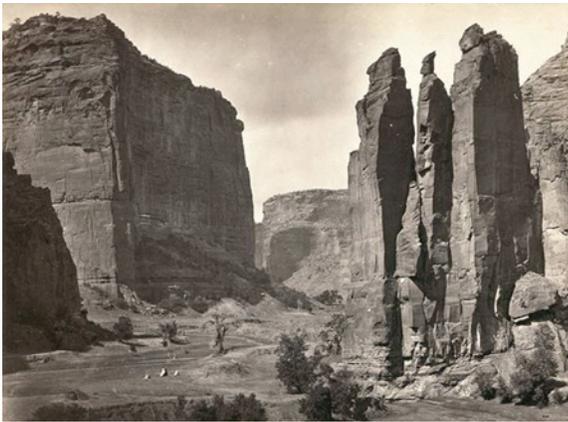
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LANDSCAPE AND PLACE

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement...

-James Agee, from *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*

Landscape photography is a form of documentary photography that describes the geography of an area or conveys and evokes a sense of place. Artists working in this genre might document the built environment, **vernacular** structures, nature, or evidence of the presence or impact of people on the land.



Timothy O'Sullivan
Cañon de Chelle. Walls of the Grand Cañon
about 1200 Feet in Height, 1873
Not held in the MoCP collection

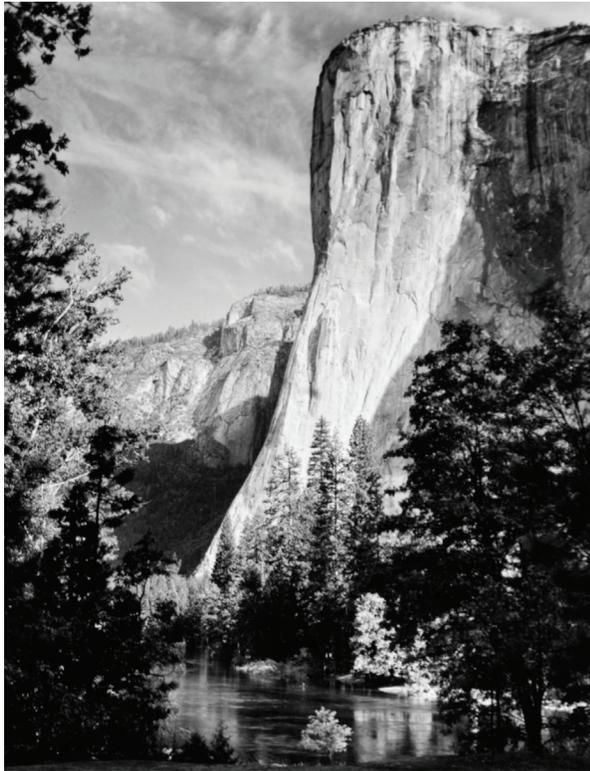


Mark Klett
Goat Lake Ice Cavern, Sawtooth Range, Idaho, 1981
From the collection of the MoCP

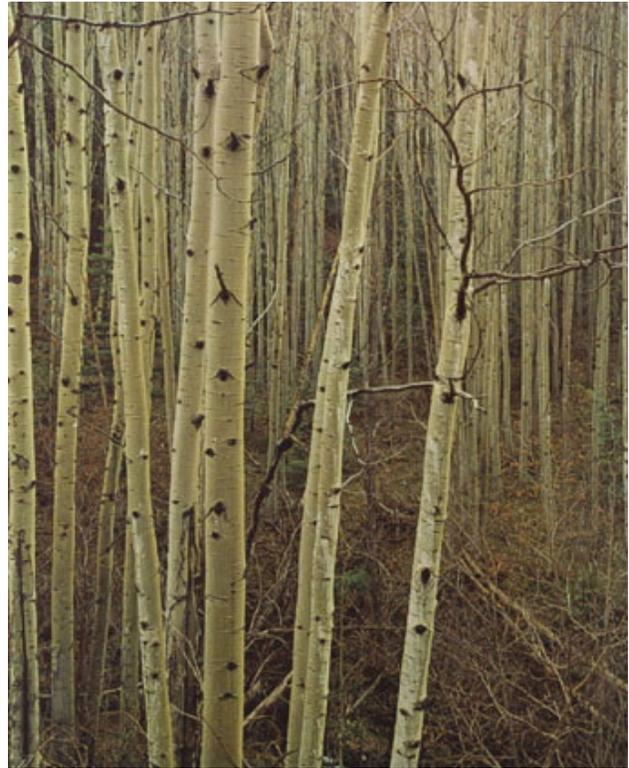
American Landscape Photography: Historic Context

In the middle to late nineteenth century, photographers including Timothy O'Sullivan, William Henry Jackson, and Carleton Watkins traveled on survey expeditions for the U.S. government and the Union Pacific Railroad exploring and documenting the vast American west. Their works often emphasized the sublime grandeur of the landscape as a symbol of national pride and strength, and exposed Americans to this vast new territory to encourage the adventurous to uproot and settle the west.

Trained both as a geologist and a photographer, contemporary landscape photographer **Mark Klett** established his artistic perspective on the Western American landscape as the chief photographer for the Rephotographic Survey Project (1977-79), which revisited scenes documented by the photographic surveys of the West in the 1860s and 1870s. Throughout his career, Klett's work has continued to connect to the work of the early American landscape photographers, but also considers land use since western expansion and notes the passage of time. Klett photographs with a large format camera to capture the landscape in precise detail and often includes a human figure in the scenes he photographs, as earlier photographers did, to provide the viewer with a sense of the grand scale of the western landscape.



Ansel Adams
El Capitan, Yosemite National Park, California, 1956
From the Collection of the MoCP



Eliot Porter
Aspens in Early Spring, New Mexico, 1957
From the Collection of the MoCP

In the early to mid-twentieth century, photographers including **Ansel Adams** and **Eliot Porter** emphasized the beauty of the America landscape using large format cameras and advanced darkroom skills to create highly descriptive photographs that depict an often **sublime** view of beauty in nature, often by avoiding evidence of what had become by then pervasive human presence in the landscape. In an era of rapid development, their idealized views were often circulated by environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club in efforts celebrate the American landscape and show the public what might be lost if our natural resources are not protected and preserved.

In 1955 **O. Winston Link** (see cover image) began documenting steam engine trains after he read in a magazine for train buffs that diesels would soon replace steam locomotives. Over the next several years, Link

created some 2,400 images along 2,500 miles of track through Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina that capture the importance of these trains in the landscape of the rural communities they linked and in the lives of their inhabitants. Townspeople often participated in the creation of the images as playful actors within each scene. Link was an exceptional technician who usually photographed at night, rigging lights throughout the scenes he photographed to create dramatic, at times almost surreal images. The most powerful and portable lighting available at the time were flash bulbs that were good for only one use and had to be replaced each time he shot a new frame. Link also photographed with a large format view camera that used single sheets rather than rolls of film so that he also had to change his film with each shot. Link would time the making of his images to the train schedules and only had one chance to get each shot right.



Robert Adams
Expressway near Colton, California, 1982
From the collection of the MoCP



Lewis Baltz
New Industrial Parks #10, from the portfolio New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California, 1974
From the collection of the MoCP

The New Topographics

In the 1975 exhibition, *The New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, curator William Jenkins noted a shift in a new generation of landscape photographers including **Robert Adams**, **Lewis Baltz**, **Stephen Shore**, and **Frank Gohlke** who often used a seemingly detached or ironic approach to show our complex relationship to the landscape. Rather than presenting heroic views of grand mountain ranges and unspoiled nature, they photographed every day locations such as suburban developments where the interests of man and nature frequently appear to collide. Lewis Baltz's 1970s series *New Industrial Parks near Irvine California* depicts the stark man-made landscape that was quickly replacing California's fertile agricultural lands. Robert

Adams's images often in part depict beauty in the Western landscape, which he often accentuates through his technical skill with a large format camera and in printing. That beauty is always interrupted or marred, however, by things such as the telephone poles and roads visible behind a grove of trees as shown in the image *Expressway near Colton, California, 1982*. In a 1974 statement accompanying his series *The New West*, Adams says, "Many have asked, pointing incredulously toward a sweep of tract homes and billboards, why picture that? The question sounds simple, but it implies a difficult issue—why open our eyes anywhere but in undamaged places like national parks? One reason is, of course, that we do not live in parks, that we need to improve things at home, and that to do it we have to see the facts without blinking."



Joel Sternfeld
McLean Virginia, 1978
 From the collection of the MoCP



Joel Sternfeld
Exhausted Renegade Elephant, Woodland, Washington, 1979
 From the collection of the MoCP

Additional Views

In the tradition of the New Topographic photographers, **Joel Sternfeld** documents the American landscape noting the ironic, often destructive impact of human activity on the land. In Sternfeld's image *McLean Virginia, 1978*, we see a fireman who appears to be shopping for pumpkins at a farm stand as a house dramatically burns in the background. Sternfeld claims that when he made this image, the farm and home depicted were scheduled to be demolished to make way for a housing development. The fire in this scene was actually a controlled burn training session for local firefighters.



William Christenberry
Kudzu and House, Tuscaloosa County, AL, 1989
 From the collection of the MoCP



William Christenberry
Site of Kudzu and House, Tuscaloosa County, AL (view II), 1992. From the collection of the MoCP

William Christenberry

As young artist who migrated from the Deep South to New York in the 1960s, William Christenberry discovered the seminal 1941 publication *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* in which photographer Walker Evans and writer James Agee described the lives of impoverished tenant farmers in Hale County Alabama, where Christenberry (who was from

Tuscaloosa) had stayed with family over several summers. The book pushed Christenberry, who had been working in the style of Abstract Expressionist painters, to realize that the stuff of his own life could be rich subject matter to explore through his art.

Throughout his career (1960s to the present) Christenberry has created highly descriptive, straightforward images that document vernacular structures and changes in the landscape over time in Hale County. Since the early 1970s, he has also created multi-media works, some realistic, others rooted in fantasy or memory, based on familiar structures, traditions, and the visual and political culture of the region. Throughout this diverse range of work, Christenberry reflects on, evokes and also preserves

the complex and rapidly changing culture of his region.

The MoCP owns ten photographs that Christenberry made between 1979 and 1992 depicting the same kudzu-covered house as it becomes increasingly dilapidated and is ultimately razed by a bulldozer. In 1994, Christenberry created a small sculpture of the same house (also in the MoCP collection) that is incredibly faithful to the original and is set in a base of red clay soil distinctive to the region.



Bob Thall
Chicago beneath the Outer Drive at Lake Street, 1982
From the collection of the MoCP



Bob Thall
Schaumburg, 1993
From the collection of the MoCP

Bob Thall

Since the 1980s, photographer Bob Thall has documented the urban landscape of his native Chicago using a large format camera and black-and-white film. Rather than focus on the typical post-card views of the Chicago's skyline, Thall creates sparse, unpeopled images on overcast days that pull our attention to the physical structure of various locations and vernacular architecture throughout the city. In the 1990s Thall began using the same cool aesthetic to photograph new development in Chicago's rapidly changing "**edge cities.**" This work was featured in a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Photography and published in the monograph *The New American Village* (1999).



Matthew Brady
Battle of Gettysburg, 1863
(not held in the MoCP collection)



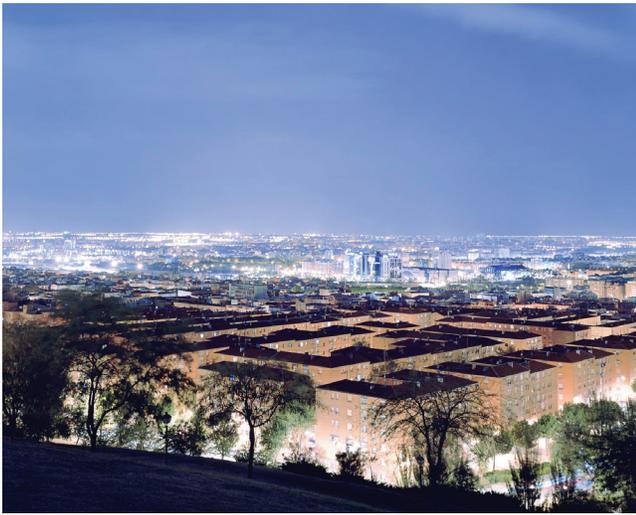
An-My Lê
29 Palms: Mechanized Assault, 2003-2004
From the collection of the MoCP

An-My Lê

In her series *29 Palms* and *Small Wars*, An-My Lê explores the military conflicts that have framed the last half-century of American history: the war in Vietnam and the current war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead of addressing her subject by creating reportage images of actual warfare, Lê photographs dramatizations of battle. *Small Wars* (1999-2002) depicts men who spend their weekends reenacting battles from the Vietnam War in the forests of Virginia. Lê's series, *29 Palms* documents a military base of the same name. Located in the California desert, it is where soldiers train before being deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. Her images are reminiscent of those made by the Civil War photographers, including Matthew Brady, Timothy O'Sullivan and Alexander Gardner who photographed the aftermath of war or at times staged or recreated scenes owing to cumbersome equipment including horse-drawn portable darkrooms and technical limitations with the available materials that made photographing action impossible. The Civil War, which took place roughly 30 years after the birth of photography, was

one of the first wars to have been extensively documented through photography and the graphic images of carnage and destruction changed how war is viewed. Lê's pictures address issues of war by looking at the preparation for combat instead of its aftermath.

Lê, who was born in Vietnam in 1960 and came to the United States as a refugee in 1975, created *Small Wars* to explore, as she describes it, "the Vietnam of the mind." Although she has vivid memories of the conflict's waning days from her teenage years in Saigon, she also knows the war, like many of us, through a variety of sources including history textbooks, movies (*Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and so on), magazines, museum exhibitions, newspapers, and perhaps the experiences of relatives or friends. By joining and documenting Vietnam War reenactors, she explores the cumulative effect that various accounts of war have on memory, both individual and collective, and ultimately questions how we remember, glorify, and imagine war after the fact.



Christina Seely
Metropolis 40° 25' N 3° 41' W (Madrid), 2005-2009
From the collection of the MoCP



Christina Seely
Lux: Metropolis 35° 10' N 136° 50' E (Nagoya), 2005-2009
From the collection of the MoCP

Christina Seely

Christina Seely's series *Lux*, titled after the system for measuring illumination, examines the disconnect between the immense beauty created by human-made light emanating from the earth's surface and the environmental impact of the world's wealthiest countries—evident as the brightest areas detected on a satellite map. The three regions most visible in NASA images are the United States, Western Europe, and Japan, which together emit approximately 45 percent of the world's CO₂ and, along with China, are the top consumers of electricity and other resources.

Suggested Viewing

MoCP collection artists working in the genre of landscape photography include: Ansel Adams; Robert Adams; Lewis Baltz; William Christenberry; Terry Evans; An-My Lê; O. Winston Link; Richard Misrach; Stephen Shore; Frank Gohlke; Mark Klett; Richard Misrach; Christina Seely; Bob Thall; Joel Sternfeld; and Alec Soth. Additional images by the artists and artist's biographies can be accessed for classroom use from the museum's website at <http://www.mocp.org/main.php?module=objects>.

LANDSCAPE AND PLACE: QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING AND DISCUSSION

- Look carefully at an individual image. Describe what you see.
- What can you tell about how this image was made?
- How do choices made by the photographer such as his or her use of light, time of day **framing**, **composition**, or **vantage point**, contribute to your perception of this place?
- What can you tell about the artist's **style**? If there is more than one work by that artist, what do the images have in common?
- What is the mood or feeling of the images? How is that conveyed?
- Are there clues in the image that suggest when and where this photograph might have been made? Describe.
- Is there evidence of human presence in this photograph? Where?
- What do we learn about the place in this picture? What details reveal that information?
- What else might this work be about? Why do you think that?
- What do you know about the maker of this image? Can you tell how he or she feels about this subject?

Activities

1. Research and Compare

Research the work of landscape photographers from traditions mentioned in the above paragraphs. Select at least one photographer from the 19th century and one more contemporary artist. Look at and read about their work.

- Compare and contrast the work of those artists.
- What connections and differences do you see among the work of these landscape photographers?

2. Photograph a Landscape and Depict a Sense of Place

Create a series of photographs that depict a place that is important or interesting to you.

- What place will you photograph? Why?
- Are there distinctive features to the natural or built environment of this place? Describe.
- Have significant events happened there?
- What scenes, places, structures, or objects might you show to teach others about that place? What moods, feelings, or histories do you associate with that place?
- How could you show those things in photographs? Consider how you might use light, time of day, vantage point, framing and composition, etc. to render your subject in a way that is visually pleasing.

Photograph that place using the strategies you describe above. Critique your images.

- Which are the most successful visually? Why?
- Which images contain details that you feel are important to describing this place?
- If you were to assemble a series of five to ten images to tell the story of this place, which images would you include? Which would you leave out? Why?
- Are there any images you wish you had made? Are there any scenes you would like to reshoot?

If time allows, reshoot and critique again. Re-edit your images and continue shooting and editing until you feel your series is successful both visually and in telling the story of this place.

Play with sequencing the images. Do you think they should be presented in a particular order? Why or why not?

Critique this series with your peers and have them describe what they learned about that place through your images. Did your images convey what you intended?

3. Writing about Landscape and Place

Much of the work of writer Barry Lopez is inspired by places he knows well and those that he comes to know and experience through his extensive travels. In *A Literature of Place* (see suggested readings) Lopez describes how the environment he grew up in, the Southern California Valley, shaped him as a person and a writer. He states:

It is my belief that a human imagination is shaped by the architecture it encounters at an early age. The visual landscape, of course, or the depth, elevation, and hues of a cityscape play a part here, as does the way sunlight everywhere etches lines to accentuate forms. But the way we imagine is also affected by streams of scent flowing faint or sharp in the larger ocean of air; by what the North American composer John Luther Adams calls the sonic landscape; and, say, by an awareness of how temperature and humidity rise and fall in a place over a year.

My imagination was shaped by the exotic nature of water in a dry southern California valley; by the sound of wind in the crowns of eucalyptus trees; by the tactile sensation of sheened earth, turned in furrows by a gang plow; by banks of saffron, mahogany and scarlet cloud piled above a field of alfalfa at dusk; by encountering the musk from orange blossoms at the edge of an orchard; by the aftermath of a Pacific storm crashing a hot, flat beach.

Added to the nudge of these sensations were an awareness of the height and breadth of the sky, and of the geometry and force of the wind... I became intimate with the elements of that particular universe. They fashioned me. I return to them regularly in essays and stories in order to clarify or explain abstractions or to strike contrasts. I find the myriad relationships in that universe comforting. They form a "coherence" of which I once was a part... My comfort, my sense of inclusion in the small universe I inhabited, came from an appreciation of, a participation in, all that I saw, smelled, tasted, and heard.

What do you notice about how Lopez describes the southern California Valley? What words and phrases stand out to you in this quote? Why?

Whether it is the main subject of a written piece or the setting where a narrative unfolds, place plays an essential role in story-telling. Select a place that is important to you.

- Begin by listing some memories and events that you associate with that place.
- Continue to list moods, feelings, and impressions that you associate with that place.
- What else do you know about that location?
- Why is this place significant to you?

Look over the notes you have made so far. Circle the words and events that you think are most essential to you in describing and evoking this place. Select a specific moment or impression to serve as a frame to tell others about that location. Use concrete sensory details in your writing as Barry Lopez does above to create an image in the mind of the reader. What might you see, smell, think, feel in that location in that moment? Begin by writing freely without stopping to edit.

Extension: Sketch a picture of that place from the written description you created. How are the two renderings alike? How do they differ? How do they function together?

LANDSCAPE AND PLACE: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

edge city

A sizable suburban area on the outskirts of a city that has developed to become independent of the larger city.

framing/composition

How the photographer composes an image in the camera's viewfinder. The organization of elements within the image.

point of view (vantage point)

Where a photographer stands in relation to the subject he or she is photographing. It can also refer to the photographer's view or opinion of that subject.

sublime

To elevate or exalt in a way that inspires awe.

style

The way something is said, made, done, or expressed. A combination of distinctive features.

time of day

The time of day in which a photograph is made using natural light can affect many factors within the image, including the rendering of color, the appearance of shadows, and the rendering of space and depth.

vernacular

An everyday style of language or architecture that is distinctive to a particular region or place.

large format camera

A camera that uses a sheet of film 4x5 inches or larger. A larger negative is capable of capturing more detail and producing higher resolution in printing than a smaller negative. Large format cameras generally give the photographer more control over things like perspective and focus. Large format cameras are bulky and must usually be used on a tripod and take more time to set up and adjust, resulting in a slower and more methodical way of working. Today some large format cameras are fitted with sophisticated digital backs that offer the quality of a large negative and the convenience of a digital file.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Robert Adams, *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values*. New York: Aperture, 1989.

Robert Adams, *Robert Adams: The New West*. New York, Aperture, 1974.

Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, *Reframing the New Topographics*, University of Chicago Press (Center for American Places), 2011.

Allison Hawthorne Deming, *Genius Loci* (Poems); New York: Penguin, 2005.

Allison Hawthorne Deming, *THE COLORS OF NATURE: Culture, Identity and the Natural World* edited with Lauret E. Savoy. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2011.

Allison Hawthorne Deming, *Writing the Sacred into the Real*. Milkweed Editions (Credo Series), 2001.

Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1987.

Barry Lopez, *A Literature of Place*. Portland Magazine. Summer 1997. http://arts.envirolink.org/literary_arts/BarryLopez_LitofPlace.html

Barry Lopez, *An Intimate Geography*, Portland Magazine. Summer. 2010.

John McPhee, *Annals of the Former World*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

Liz Wells, *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity*. I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd. London UK, 2011.

Lucy Lippard, W. J. T. Mitchell; Ann M. Wolfe: *The Altered Landscape: Photographs of a Changing Environment*. New York, Rizzoli, 2011.

Illinois Learning Standards for English Language Arts Incorporating the Common Core: Standards Addressed in This Guide:

CC.K-12.L.R.3 Knowledge of Language: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

CC.K-12.R.R.1 Key Ideas and Details: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

K-12 R R.2 CC.K-12.R.R.2 Key Ideas and Details: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CC.K-12.L.R.6 Vocabulary Acquisition and Use: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

CC.K-12.R.R.6 Craft and Structure: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CC.K-12.R.R.7 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CC.K-12.R.R.9 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

K-12 R R.10 CC.K-12.R.R.10 Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

This guide was produced by Corinne Rose, MoCP manager of education. Copyright © 2013 by Columbia College Chicago