



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

**ARIZONA
STATE MUSEUM**

Exploring Borders Writing and Visual Literacy Activities

These writing prompts and activities will help you explore ideas and information about border walls. The exhibit *A History of Walls: The Borders We Build* serves as the foundation and springboard for this exploration. This is a mini version of the six-session workshop Marge Pellegrino and Lisa Falk facilitated with students at Pueblo and City High Schools in Tucson, Arizona, in spring 2021.

1. To start:

Listing is a quick and easy tool. Lists can be used as a starting point to capture ideas you might want to revisit for a longer exploration. Lists can also serve as a positioning tool.

This is what I know at this moment:

Write a list of thoughts or facts you already hold about walls and barriers.

If you are doing this with others, share and notice what comes up. Ideas may address physical or mental walls.

2. In a class or group setting, divide the participants into four groups – one to focus on each wall in the *A History of Walls* exhibit (Great Wall of China, Berlin Wall, Israel/Palestine Barrier, US/Mexico Wall). If you're working alone, create a four-column page to take notes while perusing the exhibit.

Observation is an important writer's tool. Begin by watching the [video introduction](#) to the *A History of Walls* exhibit:

Research is invaluable whether you're writing nonfiction, fiction, or even poetry. Use the exhibit to further your knowledge. Take notes while reading and looking at the images in the exhibit. Notice what pops! A *pop* is an idea or detail that is more interesting—something that makes you feel or wonder. Capture those items for your assigned wall if you're working in groups, or for each of the four walls if you're playing on your own.

Go to the [online version of the exhibit](#) to conduct your research.

Read over your notes.

Write for three minutes about what you observed about what popped for all four walls.

- Consider what was the same? What was different?

- What kinds of details were you drawn to?
- What kinds of things spoke more loudly to you?
- What did you notice about what popped?
- What questions did your reading bring up for you?

Share your observations.

3. If you were going to dive deeper into one of the walls to share it with others, what kinds of questions would you try to answer as you researched?

List the questions.

Extension: Chose one of the questions and write about why the answer to that question would be important.

4. Try your hand at visual literacy, which helps glean information from images. Google “border walls” or “border walls art” or “US Mexico border wall” (look under the image tab) and choose two images that are very different—one might be more landscape and another a close up. One might have people in it, or be a mural on a wall.

Focus on one image. Look closely and write down five things you see. If this is done in a classroom, the words can be written on the board by a scribe as students call them out.

Now look even closer. Look around the edges, or start at the edge and cross over the image, or view the image from the center out in a concentric circle. Write five more things you see.

What does this image make you think about? What does it make you wonder?

Repeat this with the second image.

Now compare the images. What is one thing that is the same in each? One thing that is different?

Write for three-minutes about what these images tell you about borders. How do they make you feel about borders?

Again, look at the images together. What if the two images appeared together on one poster or sign? What is the message the poster’s images might convey? What title would be on the poster? You could think of the poster title as the words on a Facebook post, an Instagram story, the title of a song, or the words on a supporter or protester’s sign. Consider that the title and the images together send a message to the viewer.

Share your poster titles.

5. Research one of the walls. Your treasure hunt is to find one or two other items—something not included in the exhibit that would say something important about the wall you researched. Find something that pops for you and would evoke feelings in the viewer.

Your search might include documents, newspaper articles, maps, photographs, artworks, videos, other museum videos, oral histories, soundscapes, songs, and poetry.

Write about your item(s).

- Why did you choose that item or items?
- What does your chosen item(s) say to you?
- What feelings do you hope it/they might convey to others?

6. Consider this statement from the *A History of Walls* exhibit introduction:

“History loves a wall because a wall provides a kind of geographic and metaphoric certainty, a clear (albeit man-made) demarcation of the ending of one thing and the beginning of another. “Here at Hadrian’s Wall the Roman Empire ended and the territory of the ancient Britons began,” we might say, or, “Here at the US/Mexico border America turned from globalism toward a more isolated nationalism, symbolized by the building of this wall.”

But for the people who live with these walls, the relationship is more complicated.”

Write for three minutes about how people’s relationship with a border wall may be more complicated.

7. Playing with point of view can be a powerful way to push your thinking, or to have fun with what you’ve learned.

Write one quote from the point of view of each of these six voices.

Your quotes could be about the same issue, or random ones like in these examples:

- **wall**
[I wish I could lift the toads on the dry side that leap for the water on the other side.]
- **wall builder**
[Not my concern. or My wall will be the best!]
- **wall crusher**
[I chip away to make a passage.]
- **activist**

[Tear Down This Wall! or Fortify This Wall!]

- **someone or something in the natural world impacted by a wall**
[I jump. I crash. I fall]
- **you**
[Walls protect me. Walls keep me from my sister.]

Review your quotes. Determine which voice holds the most power for you. Once you've decided—dive in! Use that more powerful voice to create a word picture that pushes the voice to express what it is seeing, hearing, feeling, and doing.

You be the boss of how you push this idea! You could do this as either a:

- letter
 - poem
 - dialog/conversation
 - a descriptive paragraph
 - song lyrics (*corridos*)
8. Considering everything you've learned, how has your knowledge increased from the information from the exhibit, the images you viewed, your additional research, the thinking, and the writing?

Write a persuasive piece, a poem, or creative piece that shines a light on your thinking now.

If you're working in a group, consider having each person donate one line from their writing. Work together to move the lines around to find an order that creates a list poem.

For inspiration, you may want to listen to the collaborative poems the Pueblo and City High students wrote:

Link to webpage with poems

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