The background of the cover is a complex abstract composition. The top half features a series of nested, angular shapes in red, orange, and yellow, creating a sense of depth and perspective. Below these, a horizontal band of blue and green suggests a landscape or sky. The bottom half is dominated by a large, textured area of orange and red, with some darker, more abstract shapes interspersed. The overall effect is vibrant and dynamic.

# OPPOSITES ABSTRACT

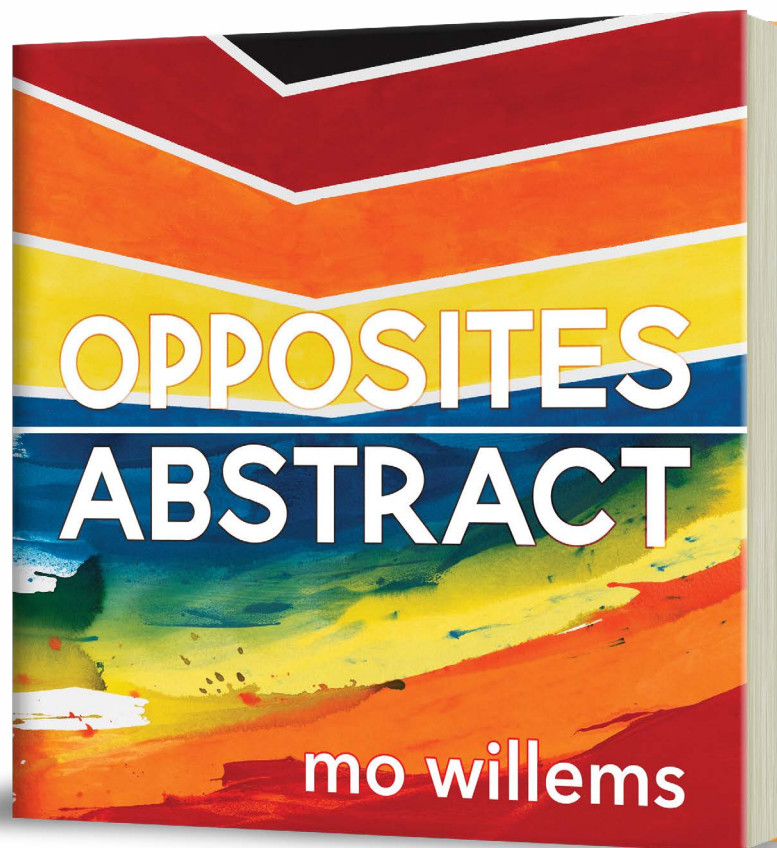
mo willems

**A TEACHING GUIDE**

# INTRODUCTION

**Mo Willems'** book *Opposites Abstract* explores the concept of opposites through abstract paintings. A group reading of this book provides both the reader and listener with an opportunity to work together to construct meaning and share ideas about what they are viewing on each page. Students will practice critical thinking skills as well as speaking and listening skills, and will demonstrate understanding through art.

Willems' illustrations will inspire curiosity, and when they are paired with his thought-provoking questions, the sky is the limit for student responses! This equalizes the classroom dynamic and allows all students to have a voice. Students should be encouraged to take risks and share their thoughts within the classroom community, where cooperative learning is nurtured. After discovering Willems' book, students will explore the full potential of their unique imaginations and will create their own abstract art.



# OPPOSITES

Begin by showing the students the book's cover and asking them what they notice. Inform the students that this book is illustrated with abstract paintings. Explain that abstract art does not try to accurately represent the real world. Instead, the artist uses lines, colors, and shapes to make artwork that may or may not reflect a non-realistic interpretation of reality. To learn more about the definition of abstract art and its various forms, visit this site from Tate: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/abstract-art>.

As a prereading activity, start a conversation about what opposites are. Explain that opposites are actions or things that are completely different from each other. Ask the entire class to generate a list of action opposites. Then, using simple movements, have the students demonstrate their understanding of this concept.

## **Invite the students to:**

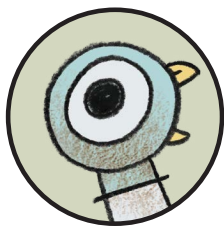
- stand up ➡ sit down
- move around ➡ stay still
- melt ➡ freeze
- smile ➡ frown
- wake up ➡ fall asleep

You can extend this activity by having the students play a game of charades. Students pantomime clues while their peers try to guess what pair of opposites they are demonstrating.

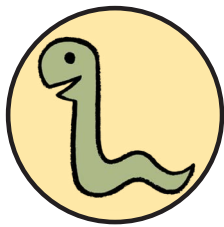
# OPPOSITES WORKSHEET

**Instructions:** Draw a line to match the word on the left with its opposite on the right.

Dirty



Long



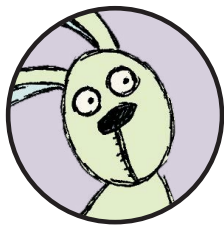
Wet



Hot



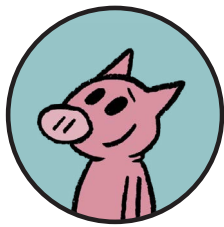
Soft



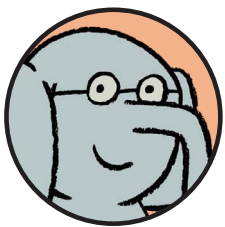
Sad



Little



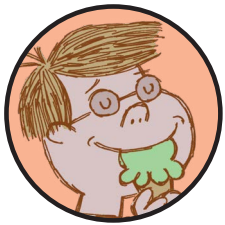
Big



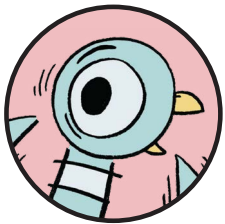
Hard



Happy



Clean



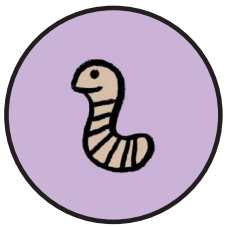
Dry



Cold



Short





# SEE



# THINK



# WONDER

Read through the entire book first, asking the students to sit quietly and look and listen. Let them know that they will have an opportunity to share their thoughts during the second reading. When you reread Willems' book, you will use *visual thinking strategies* to provide the students with a structure within which to think and share. Visual thinking strategies are thinking routines that scaffold inquiry-based thinking through close observation. Watch this short video [PZ Thinking Routines](#) or visit [Harvard's Project Zero](#) website to learn more about this fascinating process. Show the students the *Is this dark? Is this light?* pair of illustrations. Ask them to share what they see. Compile a list on chart paper or on the board so you can record their observations and revisit their ideas. Next, ask them what their observations inspire them to think about. Again, record their thoughts. And, finally, ask them to share what else they are wondering about.

Use language that is neutral when listening to the students. Avoid using guiding or participating language when responding. For example, a student shared that he saw a black circle and it made him think of the moon. You could respond, "You are suggesting that the black circle might represent the moon. What do you see that makes you think that?" Remember, there are no correct answers, so you must be sensitive about the way you respond to your students to encourage them to believe they have a voice. End the discussion after every student has had an opportunity to share their ideas.

# Is this soft? Is this hard?

## PIET MONDRIAN— INSPIRED VISUAL ART

*“Every true artist has been inspired more by the beauty of lines and color and the relationships between them than by the concrete subject of the picture.”*

—Piet Mondrian

Ask the students to observe Willems’ illustration *Is this soft?* What do they see? What are they thinking about? What do they wonder? Next, show the students Willems’ illustration *Is this hard?* Again, using visual thinking strategies, ask the students about what they are seeing, thinking, wondering. While comparing the two illustrations, review the following visual art elements with the students. Visual art elements are the building blocks of art and design. These include line, shape, and color. Which visual elements are the same in these two paintings and which ones are different?

**Piet Mondrian (1872–1944)** was a Dutch artist best known for his abstract paintings that feature only horizontal and vertical lines along with black, white, and primary colors. Share Mondrian’s painting *Composition with Yellow, Blue, and Red* 1937–1942 with the students.

Explain that the students will be creating their own Mondrian-inspired abstract painting. Ask students if they notice any similarities between Mondrian’s art and Willems’ illustrations.

### ART MATERIALS

- White 8"x11" construction paper
- Pencil
- Ruler
- Paintbrush
- Tempera paint: primary colors
- Black permanent marker

Students will use the pencil and ruler to draw vertical and horizontal lines/spaces on the paper.

Next, students will paint sections of the paper with primary colors. Remind students to leave some spaces white. Allow the paint to dry completely and then have students trace over the pencil lines with the marker to create thick black grid lines.

# Is this mechanical? Is this organic?

## THINK-PAIR-SHARE

Ask the students to observe Willems' illustration *Is this mechanical?* What do they see? What are they thinking about? What do they wonder? Brainstorm ideas about what *mechanical* means.

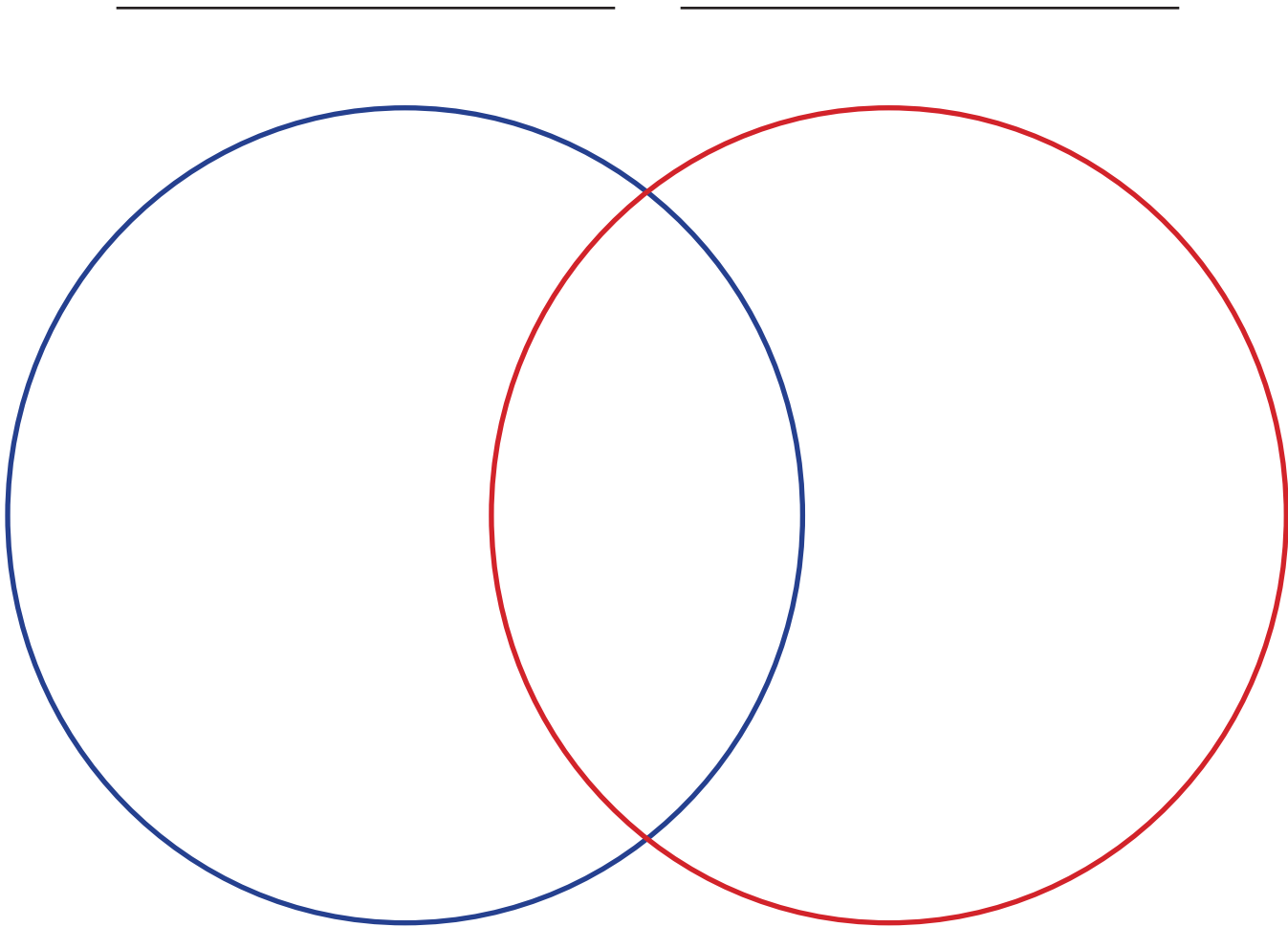
Next, show the students Willems' illustration *Is this organic?* Again, using visual thinking strategies, ask the students about what they are seeing, thinking, wondering. Brainstorm ideas about what *organic* means. What movements do these paintings inspire? Can you move like a machine? Can you move like an organism? Did Willems capture this in his illustrations?

While viewing the two illustrations, review the following visual art elements with the students: line, shape, and color. How did Willems use these visual art elements to convey feeling in his illustrations?

Students will work in pairs to create a Venn diagram using the Venn diagram worksheet. Students can write or draw their ideas into the diagram. They will compare two of Willems' illustrations from the book. *Is this an individual? Are these groups?* or *Is this calm? Is this excited?* or *Is this broken? Is this fixed?* Explain that a Venn diagram shows how two things are similar and different by using two overlapping circles. The common elements are represented within the overlap of the circles, and the uncommon elements are shown in the areas of the circles outside of the overlap. Remind students to pay attention to the visual art elements used in abstract art. Ask students to share their ideas with the class.

# VENN DIAGRAM WORKSHEET

**Instructions:** Compare two of Willems' corresponding illustrations using the Venn diagrams provided. The common elements should be represented within the overlap of the two circles, while the differences should be represented in the nonoverlapping portion of the circles.



# Is this inclusion? Is this exclusion?

## RUTH ASAWA— INSPIRED SCULPTURE

*“An artist is not special. An artist is an ordinary person who can take ordinary things and make them special.” —Ruth Asawa*

Ask the students to observe Willems' illustration *Is this inclusion?* What do they see? What are they thinking about? What do they wonder? Then ask the students to think-pair-share and discuss with their partner what they think the word *inclusion* (to admit or accept) means. Ask students to share their ideas, and record them on paper or on the board. Then invite the students to brainstorm ways that they can practice inclusion in their school community. Give examples of inclusion: for example, inviting a classmate to join a game.

Next, invite students to observe Willems' illustration *Is this exclusion?* What do they see? What are they thinking about? What do they wonder? Then ask the students to think-pair-share and discuss with their partner what they think the word *exclusion* (to ban or ostracize) means. Ask students to share their ideas and record them on paper or on the board. Then invite students to brainstorm ideas about what exclusion might look like in their school community. An example of exclusion might be not allowing a classmate to join a game. Finally, ask the students to view Willems' illustrations

once again, and discuss how his paintings embody the concepts of inclusion/exclusion.

**Ruth Asawa (1926–2013)** was a sculptor, public artist, and art education advocate. She is best known for her crocheted wire sculptures.

<https://ruthasawa.com/art/sculpture/#tied>

When introducing Asawa and her work to students, you might mention that her family was sent to live in Japanese American internment camps during World War II. This could be another opportunity to address exclusion versus inclusion and the impact it has on individuals and communities. In 1968 Asawa cofounded the Alvarado Arts Workshop at her children's school. Local artists worked with students creating art from everyday materials such as milk cartons. The following community weaving project is a tribute to Asawa's work with children and the sculptures she is famous for.

### ART MATERIALS

- Wire rack 1"x1" gap (3cm x 3cm), chicken fencing, or garden fence
- Various lengths of recycled fabric, wire, paper

This can be a year-long project. Display the wire rack in an accessible place. Invite students and school community members to add their individual contributions to the sculpture, perhaps by tying on a piece of fabric or weaving the choice of medium through the wire. Remind students that communities are individuals woven together into a collective whole.

# Is this intentional? Is this accidental?

## HELEN FRANKENTHALER— INSPIRED BLOCK PRINTS

*“A really good picture looks as if it’s happened at once. It’s an immediate image.”* —Helen Frakenthaler

Ask the students to observe Willems’ illustration *Is this intentional?* What do they see? What are they thinking about? What do they wonder? Then ask the students to think-pair-share and discuss their ideas with their partner.

Next, invite students to observe Willems’ illustration *Is this accidental?* What do they see? What are they thinking about? What do they wonder? Then ask the students to think-pair-share and discuss their ideas with their partner. Finally, ask the students to share their observations with the whole group.

**Helen Frakenthaler (1928–2011)** was an abstract expressionist painter who also experimented with printmaking and produced artworks using woodcuts.

<https://www.frakenthalerfoundation.org/artworks/prints>

### ART MATERIALS

- Linocut or Styrofoam (foam plate or tray from grocery store)
- Block printing supplies or improvise with available objects
- Construction paper or cardstock
- Pen or sharp wooden stick
- Washable tempera paints in primary colors

A block print is like a stamp. Draw a simple design by carving deep lines in the Styrofoam with a pen or sharp wooden stick. Students could model Willems’ *Is this intentional?* design. Begin with one primary color. Using a paintbrush or roller, spread tempera paint thinned with some water over the surface of the foam. Place the paper on top of the carved design and press down over the entire surface. Slowly lift the paper off to reveal the print. The block can be stamped on the same page multiple times in a row to create a pattern, or on top of the existing print to create layers. Students can experiment with adding multiple colors or mixing colors. Students can slide the paper across the foam carving to create an “accidental” piece instead of an intentional design.

# Is this awake? Is this asleep?

## POETRY

During this activity, students will write a free-verse list poem inspired by Willems' *Is this awake? Is this asleep?* pair of illustrations. Explain to the students that a list poem (also known as a catalog poem) is a poem that lists things such as names, places, actions, thoughts, and/or images. Ask the class to brainstorm a list of words evoked by the illustration. Write the words onto strips of paper. Once all students have contributed a word, the educator can read the list as is and then invite students to rearrange the words into a cohesive whole.

Begin or end the poem with Willems' question from the book. For example, *Is this awake?*

A choral reading would be a powerful presentation once the poem is complete. Display the poem on the board and ask each student to read his/her word in sequence. Ask someone to record the reading.

Following the template shown here as a starting point, invite the students to write their own line poems using the *Is this asleep?* illustration. When everyone writes about the same painting, the entire group shares the experience of hearing everyone's unique interpretation of what they are observing. The students can read their list poems to the class.

## Is this asleep?

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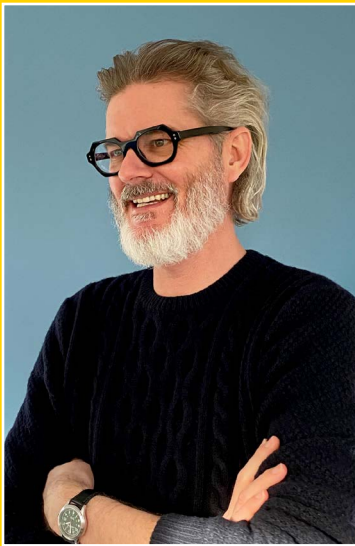
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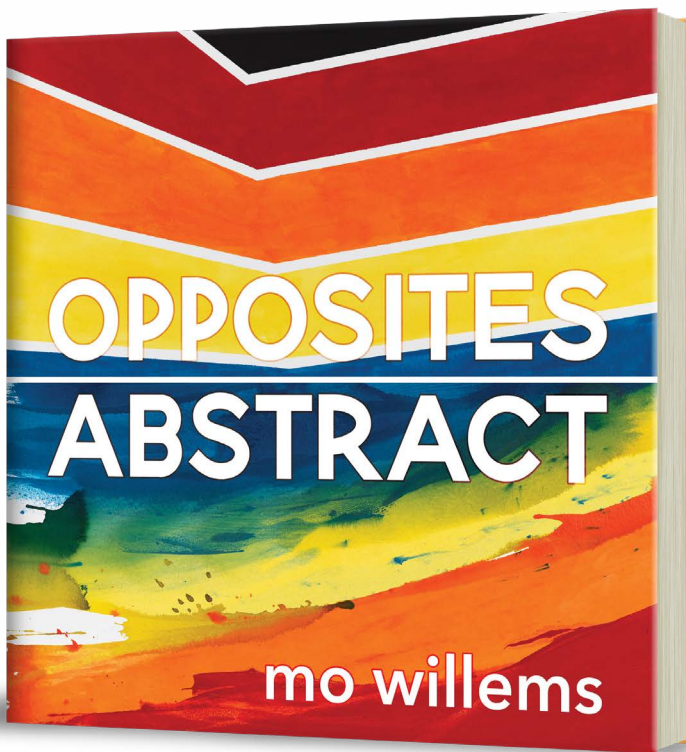


## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**Mo Willems**, a number one *New York Times* best-selling author and illustrator, has been awarded three Caldecott Honors, two Theodor Seuss Geisel Medals, five Geisel Honors, and six Emmy Awards. He served as the inaugural Education Artist-in-Residence at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. In addition to his work in books, theater, and television, Mo's art has been exhibited around the world, including major retrospectives at the High Museum of Art (Atlanta, Georgia), the New-York Historical Society (New York City), and the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art (Amherst, Massachusetts). He lives with his family in Massachusetts.

Hear Mo discuss the inspiration behind the book:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClcAGOD2k9E>



★ "In this high-concept, image-focused picture book, Caldecott Honoree Willems explores the fundamentals of so-called opposites and playfully interrogates nonfigurative images' associations."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

★ "Enticing acrylic-and-ink abstracts that would feel equally at home on an art museum's walls or a child's bedroom floor."

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"A work of immense skill and artistry."

— *Booklist*

**Opposites Abstract** | 978-1-368-07097-3 | \$14.99

This guide was created by Ms. Jennifer Murphy, a kindergarten teacher at New Hingham Regional Elementary School in Chesterfield, Massachusetts. Ms. Murphy uses arts integration in her classroom to provide multiple modalities through which her students can access curriculum and demonstrate understanding.