Reading skills practice: The history of graffiti – exercises

Is graffiti a vibrant urban art form or senseless vandalism? When did graffiti first become popular? Read this article to find out about the history of street art and hear from both sides of the debate.

Preparation

Are these ideas for or against graffiti? Choose *for* or *against:*

1.	Graffiti is a way for people to express their ideas and feelings.	*For/Against*
2.	It is a waste of money cleaning it up.	*For/ Against*
3.	Graffiti ruins public areas and makes children afraid to play in parks.	*For/Against*
4.	Graffiti makes a town look more attractive.	*For/Against*
5.	Why should one person decide what public property looks like?	*For/Against*
6.	Museums and art galleries now include graffiti in their collections.	*For/Against*
7.	Graffiti is art.	*For/Against*
8.	Graffiti is vandalism.	*For/Against*

The first drawings on walls appeared in caves thousands of years ago. Later the Ancient Romans and Greeks wrote their names and protest poems on buildings. Modern graffiti seems to have appeared in Philadelphia in the early 1960s, and by the late sixties it had reached New York. The new art form really took off in the 1970s, when people began writing their names, or 'tags', on buildings all over the city. In the mid seventies it was sometimes hard to see out of a subway car window, because the trains were completely covered in spray paintings known as 'masterpieces'.

In the early days, the 'taggers' were part of street gangs who were concerned with marking their territory. They worked in groups called 'crews', and called what they did 'writing' – the term 'graffiti' was first used by The New York Times and the novelist Norman Mailer. Art galleries in New York began buying graffiti in the early seventies. But at the same time that it began to be regarded as an art form, John Lindsay, the then mayor of New York, declared the first war on graffiti. By the 1980s it became much harder to write on subway trains without being caught, and instead many of the more established graffiti artists began using roofs of buildings or canvases.

The debate over whether graffiti is art or vandalism is still going on. Peter Vallone, a New York city councillor, thinks that graffiti done with permission can be art, but if it is on someone else's property it becomes a crime. 'I have a message for the graffiti vandals out there,' he said recently. 'Your freedom of expression ends where my property begins.' On the other hand, Felix, a member of the Berlin-based group Reclaim Your City, says that artists are reclaiming cities for the public from advertisers, and that graffiti represents freedom and makes cities more vibrant.

For decades graffiti has been a springboard to international fame for a few. Jean-Michel Basquiat began spraying on the street in the 1970s before becoming a respected artist in the '80s. The Frenchman Blek le Rat and the British artist Banksy have achieved international fame by producing complex works with stencils, often making political or humorous points. Works by Banksy have been sold for over £100,000. Graffiti is now sometimes big business.

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1. Check your understanding: matching

Write the paragraph headings next to the paragraphs. One heading is not needed.

Art or vandalism?	Increasing exposure and attention	
Famous graffiti artists		Not just a modern phenomenon

1. paragraph 1 _____
2. paragraph 2 _____
3. paragraph 3 _____
4. paragraph 4 _____
5. not needed _____

2. Check your understanding: multiple choice

Choose the best answer to these questions:

1. Why was the seventies an important decade in the history of graffiti?

A. That was when modern graffiti first appeared.
B. That was when modern graffiti first became really popular.
C. That was when graffiti first reached New York.

2. What is a 'masterpiece' in graffiti?

A. A really high-quality piece of graffiti.
B. A work of graffiti showing the artist's name.
C. A full piece of graffiti, like those seen on subway trains.

3. What was the main motivation for the first taggers?

A. Showing which streets belonged to which gangs.
B. Creating a strong visual identity for their 'crew'.
C. Sending coded messages to other gangs.

4. Who coined the phrase 'graffiti'?

A. New York gangs who had a lot of Italian immigrant members.
B. A newspaper and an author.
C. The man who was the mayor of New York in the late seventies.

5. How did things change after the first war on graffiti?

A. It was considered a more serious crime.
B. Graffiti artists had to find different places to paint.
C. New York looked a lot cleaner

6. **What does New York city councillor Peter Vallone say about graffiti?**

A. Graffiti can be good for cities as long as it is tasteful and conveys positive messages.
B. Graffiti can be beautiful if it is done by a skilled artist.
C. Graffiti is a crime if the artist does not have permission.

7. **What do the Berlin-based group Reclaim Your City say about graffiti?**

A. Involving young people in graffiti stops them getting involved with serious crime.
B. Graffiti helps the public to own the streets and take control away from advertisers.
C. Graffiti actually increases the value of property by making the area more attractive.

8. **What is the author's final point?**

A. Graffiti has now become mainstream and can make artists a lot of money.
B. Graffiti is not a good way to become a respected artist.
C. Some of the most popular graffiti artists end up being exploited by the art world.

3. Check your vocabulary: gap fill

Complete the gaps with a noun from the box.

stencil	springboard	spray paints		
property	vandal crews	canvas	Taggers	

1. People who graffiti their names are called_____.
2. Graffiti is usually done with _____.
3. Taggers originally worked in groups called_____.
4. A piece of heavy fabric on which a painting can be created is called a _____.
5. Something that someone owns is called their_____.
6. A person who deliberately destroys or damages someone else's property is called a _____.
7. If something helps to start an activity or process, we say it is a _____t o doing something.
8. A piece of plastic, cardboard or other material with a design cut into it to reproduce that pattern is called a_____.