

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Pd.: \_\_\_\_\_ Sec: \_\_\_\_\_

**Prompt:** For some, graffiti is a way for artists to express themselves and influence their society through art. For others, graffiti is vandalism that destroys the surfaces on which they appear. Is graffiti considered art or vandalism? Write a multi-paragraph argument essay in which you make a claim, address a possible counterargument, and support your thinking with evidence from the text.

## Text 1

### Gritty gray Bogota Gets a Big Splash of Color

By Miami Herald, adapted by Newsela staff

02.11.14

BOGOTA, Colombia — This gritty city of 7.6 million rarely gets respect. It often ranks near the bottom in “livability” surveys and near the top of the hemisphere’s ugliest capitals. But in recent years, it has been getting an unintentional makeover, as lax laws and blank walls have made it a haven for local and international graffiti artists.

Now, this capital city seems to be in bloom, as everything from high-art to hurried scrawls spring from overpasses, storefronts and sidewalks. The splash of color is earning the city praise and recognition in the art world — even as some here wonder about the line between art and vandalism. Bogota’s street-art scene is part accident, part design. The city was already becoming a hotbed for graffiti when the mayor rolled out a law last year trying to regulate the practice. Now, graffiti is allowed everywhere except monuments, government buildings and public infrastructure, like bridges.

### Wild West Of Street Art

Artists do need permission before tagging their personal signatures on private property. But while fines and punishments do exist, some say the new rules have given graffiti a stamp of approval and turned Bogota into a street-artist Wild West. “I can walk out onto the freeway right now and start painting and the police will just drive by and not say a thing,” said El Pez, 37, an artist from Barcelona, Spain. El Pez moved to Bogota six years ago, in part attracted by the free and open attitude. His work, which has been dubbed “happy style,” features wide-eyed, grinning animals and has found a global following; for the last three years, he’s exhibited at Art Basel in Miami, a famous show of valuable art. “Five years ago, there wasn’t a lot going on here,” he said. “Now, there’s a lot of talent and a lot of freedom to communicate.”

For the most part, the city seems better off with the blind-eye policy. In Bogota, graffiti artists can work in daylight and often without police harassment. This allows them the time to create large, intricate murals, said Christian Petersen, an Australian artist who does guided tours of the city’s street art. “It’s a unique situation here, and that encourages a lot of good-quality work,” he said. “Ironically, in places where it’s highly illegal, it encourages more tagging and bombing and stuff the general public dislikes and defines as vandalism.”

### Too Cozy With Graffitiros?

Mayor Gustavo Petro has called graffiti a way “to overcome social segregation.” To encourage it, he’s offered grants to artists to paint in neglected areas and public markets. “Art is also for the workers and the humble,” he said recently as he inaugurated a mural. “It’s a way to overcome our problems by looking at these colors and beauty.”

But some purists worry that the city is getting too cozy with the local graffitiros. “Street art is like a virus that expands, which is good, because artists get to express all their marginality on the street,” said Maria Elvira Ardila, a curator at Bogota’s Museum of Modern Art. “But when these acts of street art become institutional — are sponsored by the mayor’s office or other government institutions — they lose their character.” The museum has debated having a show featuring local street artists. But to put them in a museum setting would destroy their reputation as outsiders, Ardila said.

For others, the debate is less philosophical. Milena Sandra oversees a high-end auto repair shop that works on Volkswagens and Audis. The large, corner building with its high white walls makes a tempting target and it's covered in graffiti tags and signatures. "We used to paint every six months but the next day — or two at the most — it would be covered in graffiti again," she said. "We've given up." Sandra said the city's relaxed attitude toward graffiti may be to blame. "Because kids see it everywhere, they think it's OK to do it," she said.

### **Stinkfish's Signature And Tag**

A turning point for the city came in 2011, when police gunned down Felipe Diego Becerra, a 16-year-old graffiti artist painting on a bridge. The officer claimed he mistook Becerra's spray-paint can for a gun. Witnesses, however, say the teenager was shot in the back. The case is ongoing but some say it was a watershed — after that, police have given graffiti artists wider berth.

When Miami graffiti artist Israel Hernandez-Liach, 18, died in August after being tasered by Miami Beach police, it resonated here. Hernandez was born in Colombia and was tagging a shuttered McDonald's when he was caught.

Those who embrace "acceptable" street art but dismiss tagging as vandalism don't understand the art form, said Stinkfish, 33. He's one of Colombia's best-known artists and is part of the APC art group that's active here and in Mexico. Stinkfish paints high-contrast, detailed portraits that have earned him invites to festivals around the world. But he's also covered the city with his signature and his tag — a toothy miniature man — including in areas that are illegal. "The streets should be a space for free communication, but for a long time it has belonged to corporations, companies, the church, people with money," he said. "For it to be free, you have to paint what you want where you want — whether that's your name, a mural or a face."

## **Text 2**

**Outdoor Enthusiasts Infuriated by National Park Graffiti** By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff 05.05.15

JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK, Calif. — Andre Saraiva owns nightclubs in Paris and New York, and he works as the top editor of a men's fashion magazine. He also is a graffiti artist known around the world. Saraiva became famous for painting a cartoon figure called Mr. A. all over Paris. Two months ago, a photo of a boulder he painted in California's Joshua Tree National Park showed up on the website of Modern Hiker magazine. It was marked with his signature, OX. Since then, American nature lovers have flooded the Internet with outrage about what he did.

Saraiva is of a new generation of graffiti artists who regard nature as their canvas. They tag in national parks, then post photos of their work on the Internet. Those acts infuriate lovers of the outdoors. Many of them are otherwise fans of graffiti art. "This is a very complex issue," said Casey Schreiner, editor of Modern Hiker. "How different is graffiti in national parks than street art? If street art is OK, is this OK?"

Schreiner asked if there is a connection between the two. "National parks are special places for most Americans," he said. "Seeing them marked up is like getting punched in the gut."

### **Graffiti Surging In Parks Near Big Cities**

Federal officials say graffiti is surging in some parks, even as it has been declining in most others. Hardest hit are parks near big cities. Two of them that have experienced a rise in graffiti include Golden Gate National Recreation Area near San Francisco and Joshua Tree, not far from Los Angeles.

In 2013, graffiti artists vandalized the popular Rattlesnake Canyon in Joshua Tree. Workers just finished removing graffiti from the face of Barker Dam in the park, and in February, someone painted a large, bright blue giraffe on a boulder in another area. About the same time, someone painted a huge skull on the wall of a historical structure. "That makes me sick," muttered backpacker Steve Axthelm, of Portland, Oregon, as he looked at the skull.

## **The Point? Be Provocative**

Humans have been leaving marks in nature since prehistoric tribes put outlines of handprints on cave walls. These days, on the Internet, there is growing acceptance for tagging private property, like buildings. Google recently launched a website featuring street art around the world.

But taggers in national parks have a different kind of purpose. "If provoking outrage is not part of your intention as a graffiti artist, why do it?" said Jeremy Cross, an artist in California. In the modern art world, tagging a wall is seen as old fashioned, Cross said. Tagging in a national park is edgier, although graffiti artists are setting themselves up for criticism.

## **Park Officials Are Fighting Back**

Not long ago, graffiti in national parks throughout the Western United States led to an online petition at [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov). It urges the Obama administration to take action against the artist.

She is believed to be Casey Nocket, 22, of New York, said a spokesman for the National Park Service. Evidence collected so far includes selfies of a young woman painting colorful faces on rocks and boulders. Federal authorities suspect Nocket is responsible for graffiti in eight national parks, including Joshua Tree. The snapshots, signed with the phrase "Creepytings 2014," were posted on California hiking websites.

Park officials are fighting back with hidden video cameras and a new computer database, said David Smith, superintendent of Joshua Tree. The database allows park officials to compare photos of graffiti done in different parks. A year ago, the park service brought a case against three youths after they posted on Twitter and Instagram.

The hiking community is also increasing its own policing. Schreiner said Modern Hiker never intended to investigate graffiti, but the issue has caught fire. "So it's one of the things we do now, full time," he said. Schreiner added that passions run high, with some readers asking for the addresses of the taggers.

## **Well-Known Artist Used Erasable Paint**

Saraiva is the best-known artist who has tagged in a national park. He then denied that the boulder he tagged was even in the park, posting on Instagram that the work was done in a friend's backyard. Readers then decided to investigate and found the boulder's exact location. Their conclusion? It was definitely on national park grounds. His lawyer said Saraiva had scrawled what he called an unimportant artistic expression on the rock, using erasable paint. On April 1, Saraiva paid a fine of \$275, officials said.

Meanwhile, some private businesses said too much attention is focused on graffiti in national parks. People need to care more about graffiti on buildings and trains, say the businesses, which must paint over the graffiti all the time. "I wish they were just as outraged over graffiti on other people's private property," said Lena Kent, a spokeswoman for Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway. Its freight cars and engines are tagged every day.