



Visual Literacy Discussion Strategies

The following **4 strategies for engaging students with works of art** can be adapted to fit a wide array of student learners and instructional goals. These strategies help students build visual literacy and comprehension skills when applied repeatedly.

I Wonder

This strategy provides an opportunity for inquiry and the planned opportunity for research.

- Students respond to a work of art and inquire about it.
- Teachers create a list of their questions.
- Students research and construct information to share with class.
- Student questions can be used by the teacher as the basis for lesson plans.

Begin the session by asking students to look quietly at a work of art. Then, ask them to respond to the following questions:

What do you see?

What does this work of art make you wonder?

How could we answer some of your I-Wonder statements by just looking?

Where else could we begin to seek answers?

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

This approach uses art to teach thinking, communication skills, and visual literacy. Students are first asked to look at an image without talking. Then the teacher/facilitator asks 3 non-directive questions. These questions encourage students to examine what they see. Later more specific, probing and directed questions can be added. From the beginning, students are also asked to back up interpretations with visual evidence; whenever they state an opinion, teachers should ask them, "What do you see that makes you say that?"

The teacher ensures that every response is heard and acknowledged, by pointing to what is mentioned as students talk, and then paraphrasing what is said. As the discussion evolves, teachers link various related answers, helping to make students aware of their converging and diverging views, and of their developing skills at

constructing shared, yet varied meanings. All along teachers are facilitators of the students' process, never the expert.

VTS Questions:

What is going on in this picture?

What do you see that makes you say that?

What more can we find?

Time and Comparison

This approach demonstrates how spending ample time looking can change the way we see a work of art. It also reveals the power of comparison and how works of art can shed light on one another.

Select two works of art that have interesting comparisons or juxtapositions. Give the following prompt for each work:

We will look silently at this work of art for 1 minute. After 5 seconds, make a note of your first impressions. Then, look again. When you are prompted write down your later impressions.

What did spending time looking reveal to you about this painting? What did you notice first vs. later?

Consider both paintings together and ask:

How does spending time with both paintings affect your perception of each?

Nouns and Adjectives

This strategy encourages students to consider how artists communicate information through a visual medium. Have students respond to the first two questions in writing or facilitate as a group discussion. Tip: record student answers to use later for the story.

What are some nouns you see in this painting?

What are some adjectives you see in this painting?

Select a few of the adjectives that students offer and ask:

How did the artist create the effect of [insert adjective]?

Have students create a **6-word poem or story** about the work of art using only their nouns and adjectives.

Inquiry through Art - Three Basic Moves

(Adapted from Schmidt, Laurel. *Classroom Confidential: The 12 Secrets of Great Teachers*, 2004)

1. Ask initiating questions.
2. Ask questions to respond and follow-up.
3. Insert information at key points.

“The word *inquiry* tells it all. It’s about motion—probing, eliciting, pressing for, searching, seeking, scrutinizing. Inquiry is an interactive, give-and-take-ish way to pursue learning with your students. It’s the opposite of those monologues called the didactic approach, where the teacher delivers large shipments of information to students who are apparently “learning” ...

So instead of the tidy game of ping-pong that occurs with didactic teaching, inquiry stimulates talking, puzzling, risking, and debating. Students feel confused, frustrated, tense, puzzled, affronted, shocked, determined, and sometimes triumphantly surprised at their own cognitive accomplishments.”
(Schmidt, pp. 93 and 94)

1. Good **initiating questions** are open-ended.

The following **Tier 1 initiating questions** begin the job of looking at and unpacking works of art –

- What do you notice?
- What does this work of art remind you of?
- What do you see?
- What do you suppose is happening here?
- What words, thoughts, images, or sensations (sounds, smells) come to mind as you look at this?
- What does this work make you wonder?

After students have done some deep looking and open-ended musing around a work of art, you might switch to **Tier 2 initiating questions**. These questions move students’ thinking in a particular direction and may make use of the following words:

- Think
- Would
- Could
- Might

Why do you think the artist included these particular figures in the painting?

How would you describe the landscape in this work?

What might we understand about the artist’s view of the individuals pictured?

What could be said about the mood of this scene?

2. Response and follow-up questions are critical, especially when a student provides an answer that lacks precision or clarity. Your response or follow-up should keep a student thinking and open up the topic as opposed to stopping the line of inquiry. Use questions to draw out evidence and explore implications, or help students examine their assumptions, clarify their thoughts, and consider their own point of view.

Example

Teacher: "Why do you think the artist included these particular figures in the painting?"

Student: "Because they are important people?"

Sample responses and follow-up questions:

"That's an interesting idea. Can you tell me more?"

"What do you mean by 'important'? Could you give me an example?"

"Can you tell me about the kinds of things that make people 'important'?"

Questions to continue to probe:

"Why do you think artists represent important people in art?"

"How does the artist let us know that the people in this painting are important?"

Other good follow-up questions and prompts:

- Could you explain that further?
- Could you put that another way?
- What would someone who disagrees say?
- What is an alternative?
- You seem to be assuming _____. How would you justify this?
- When wouldn't your statement be true?
- How do you know?
- What would change your mind?
- What effect would that have?
- Tell us more about how that would work.

3. Information should be used at key places in the process to stretch thinking and deepen understanding. Keep a tally or summarize periodically what has been discovered thus far through student thinking and guided conversation. Consider where your own knowledge (stories, documents, photographs, charts, graphs) should enter the discussions to help students reach the next level.