

Teaching with Works of Art: Look, Analyze, Investigate, Interpret, Synthesize

The following types and sequence of questions and activities can help students think about and draw meaning from works of art:

Start by Looking

- **Questions or activities that encourage students to examine the artwork—to spend time looking.** Examples: *Look closely at this work of art for a few minutes and then we'll have a discussion about what you see. Take a minute to study this image and list in writing the details you notice; afterward we'll have a discussion.*
- **Questions that invite students to share observations.** Examples: *So what did you see? What's going on in the image/work of art?*
- **Questions that direct attention to things you want students to notice, related to key ideas you want them to understand.** Examples: *What is something you notice about ___? Describe the ___ in the image.*

Begin to Analyze

- **Questions that help students analyze the image and artist's visual strategies.** Examples: *What did you notice first and why? What's the focal point? How does the artist show us what's important? How does your eye travel through the picture, and why? Notice the artist's use of lines (or colors, shapes, etc.). What adjectives would you use to describe the lines (colors, shapes, etc.)? What's the overall mood of the painting? What visual strategies did the artist use (lines, colors, etc.) to create that mood?*

Make Some Inferences

- **Questions that invite students to speculate about the meaning of the artwork. Guide students to support their responses with evidence.** Examples: *What do you think the artist wanted to communicate? What do you see that makes you say that? What's the main idea? What in the artwork makes you think that? What title would you give it and why?*

- **Questions that prepare students to do research—encourage students to ask their own questions.** Examples: *What would you like to know about the artwork? What would you like to ask the artist? How might this work of art relate to the period/event we are studying?*

Investigate

Start by learning what organization owns the work of art under investigation and whether that organization provides information about it on its website. Museum websites tend to have useful information and are good places to begin researching works of art. The questions and categories below can help students organize their research. Depending on the class subject, some of the questions will be more relevant than others.

- **Questions about the time period—historical context**
 - *At the time the artwork was made, what was happening in society, the economy, or politics that the artist was probably responding to?*
 - *What do primary or secondary sources tell us about that time period that is relevant to understanding the artwork?*
 - *How does the artwork relate to what was happening at that time? Cite specific evidence in the artwork when making your point.*
- **Questions about the artwork**
 - *What is the subject? What does the artwork represent?*
 - *Does the artwork represent a point of view—literally and figuratively?*
 - *What visual strategies did the artist use to get his/her ideas across?*
 - *What material is the artwork made from? (Is it durable, widely available, difficult to work with, or costly, for example?)*
 - *What is the format (large, small, one-of-a-kind, or produced in multiples, for example)?*
 - *Did the artist write about the work? Is he/she quoted as saying anything about it?*
 - *What did critics or art historians say about it?*
 - *In what ways is the work a reflection of society or a product of its time?*

- *Why was the artwork made? (Was it made for or commissioned by somebody? Was it intended for display in a public setting or somebody's home, for example?)*
- *What expectations was the artist responding to?*
- **Questions about the artist**
 - *When did the artist live?*
 - *Where did he/she work most of the time?*
 - *What about the artist's life experiences, beliefs, or affiliations might have influenced or inspired him/her to make the work of art?*
 - *What was happening in the artist's life when he/she made the work?*
 - *What is the artist known for (what subjects or processes for example)?*
 - *What was he/she most interested in exploring as an artist?*

Informed Interpretation and Synthesis

After looking closely at, analyzing, and investigating a work of art, what conclusions can students draw about it? Did students revise their thinking? What connections can students make between the artwork and the larger classroom unit/lesson and/or their personal experience? What new questions do they have?

- **Sample questions:**
 - *What do you think the artist's message is?*
 - *What are some big or main ideas represented in this work of art?*
 - *How would you describe and explain this artwork to somebody else?*
 - *How do you think the artwork relates to the time period in which it was made? What does the artwork tell us about that period? How might the artwork reflect some of the ideas or values of that era? How does it reflect one point of view of that era?*
 - *Did any of your ideas about the artwork change after you researched it? Did any stay the same? Please explain.*
 - *What do you think about how the artist communicates?*
 - *How does this artwork relate to our larger unit of study?*
 - *Do you think this artwork relates to your experience, and if so, how?*

Next Step: Application and Response

Have students respond creatively to the artwork—building on ideas and themes that the artist explored.

- **Sample questions:**
 - How might you represent some of the ideas you discovered in the work of art? Make a work of art, write a poem, perform a short play, or compose some music that expresses these ideas in your own way.