

Key Teaching Questions

This reference sheet is designed to help teachers engage their students with close observations of artworks. We have found that asking students about what they see encourages them to look closely at these primary sources and make connections. The first section focuses on open-ended observation questions which allow students to explore what they see. The second section contains guided questions which help teachers shape the conversation.

Observation Questions

When teaching from a work of art, we suggest that teachers ask their students to take a moment to look closely at the image and then ask one of the following questions. Afterward, follow up with another question such as, "What else do you see?" or "What do you see that makes you say that?"

Example	Purpose
What do you see?	Encourages students to describe or list what they see.
What do you notice?	Allows students to interpret the object, the details, and relationships.
What is going on in this piece?	Implies that there is more complexity to the piece than may be apparent at first glance or that there may be a narrative to the piece.
What else do you see?	Encourages the continuation of observation and discussion.
What you do see that makes you say that?	Makes students accountable for their observations by citing visual evidence.

Guided Questions

Convergent (closed) questions	Divergent (open) questions
<p>Convergent questions tend to converge to one expected answer or idea. Although several answers may be possible, they tend to converge.</p> <p>Describe the position of the person in the painting.</p> <p>What did the artist do to make the person in this sculpture look sad (joyful, angry, thoughtful, etc)?</p> <p>What are the similarities and differences between this work of art and (name another work)?</p>	<p>Divergent questions have several right answers. Students are encouraged to generate their own ideas or take a new perspective on a given topic.</p> <p>Why might the artist have chosen those colors / shapes / objects?</p> <p>What if the artist had chosen (brighter)(darker) colors?</p> <p>How might the artist shape this work to appeal to "other" audiences?</p>

Question type	Example	Purpose
Memory questions Personal experience questions	What is a symbol? What do you know about ancient Egypt? Have you ever had your portrait taken? How was your portrait similar/different? Who is this portrait of?	Answers are based on prior knowledge. To build K-W-L skills: what do we know; what do we want to know; what have we learned. To connect artistic expression to self-expression. To set the stage for exploration of this or another art work.
Description Evidence	What's going on in this painting? What do you see that makes you think he's about to leave?	To build student's observation skills; To encourage students to offer visual evidence for their observations.
Compare and Contrast	How is the pose in the portrait of George Washington similar to the sculpture of the Buddha?	To build students' critical thinking skills.
Premise or hook	If I told you that this sculpture stood outside a temple, what would that tell you about the character?	To introduce facts or pertinent information that further students' interpretation and analysis.
Evaluation	Do you think the artist successfully captured the mood of the city?	To build students' skills at judging, valuing, defending, or justifying choices.

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