

## Best Practices: Teaching with Works of Art

1. **Listening:** Practice the art of truly listening to students and allow time and freedom for students to share their ideas and wonders both in pairs and with the whole group. Set structures within your lesson, such as Think/Pair/Share, See/Wonder, and Wait time, providing time and space for students' voices to be expressed and heard. Plan your tour to be flexible enough for your group's curiosities to guide the direction of the conversation. Ask yourself whether or not each stop has a balance between the teacher and the students talking.
2. **Timing/Flow of Conversations:** Facilitating a rich discussion about works of art requires time for participants to look, think, and hear others' ideas, as well as repeating this cycle as many times as the class needs. This can be a challenge especially with limited timing on tour stops, but keep striving towards richer and deeper conversations. One way to delve deeper is to move beyond the "See" portion of the discussion and make time for critical thinking, imaginative, curricular, or process-based questions in the "think" section. (Students continue observing as they answer these other questions.) We will always start with observations as it is the basis of everything else, but be cognizant of conversation flow and how the questions you ask can contribute to the overall direction of the discussion.
3. **Open-Ended Questions:** Open-ended questions, as compared to close-ended questions, require more than yes or no responses. Open questions invite participants to think more about their responses; garner more information, encourage authentic responses, and provide more opportunities to express one's self. During lessons, limit the use of close-ended questions, and try to follow them with open-ended questions.

### **Examples:**

- What do you think might happen next?
    - *Not: Do you think something is going to happen?*
  - How might the artist have made this painting?
    - *Not: Do you know how the artist made this?*
  - Describe the colors you see.
    - *Not: Can you describe the colors you see?*
  - Do you see any lines in this piece? How would you describe them? (Closed followed by open question)
4. **Citing Evidence:** Provide frequent opportunities for students to support their ideas by citing evidence in the work of art. For example, ask, "What do you see that makes you say that?" or "What did the artist do in this painting that makes you think that?"
  5. **Stories and Content:** Students remember dramatically told stories. Make an effort to find an interesting piece of content about the artist or work of art and craft a well-told, one-minute story to share between the middle and the end of a tour stop. Other opportunities to add content might include weaving in the Essential Question, curricular/vocabulary content, and facts about the work of art, artist, or context. Adding bits of content during a discussion should feel natural and happen

gradually. This process encourages learning, because the information connects with what is being talked about at the moment. Listen for cues in participants' responses to help know when to bring content-specific information into the mix. Sharing a small amount of content might answer students' closed-ended questions during the "see" and "think" portions of your conversation. It may also inspire students to "wonder" about deeper, more open-ended ideas relevant to the art's background information.

6. **Model Activities and Probe for Thinking:** Before asking students to sketch, act, or write a poem, take a moment to model what you are asking, saying, "For example, if I were doing this, I might..." and then sketch, act, or write a poem visibly while describing what you are doing and thinking in the process. After students have completed a sketch, movement, or writing activity, ask how this activity affected their thinking about a work of art, and if they have any new observations.
7. **Paraphrasing and Using Vocabulary:** When you paraphrase a response, the goal is to restate the comment (often times the main idea of what was said) using different words without altering the meaning. Repeating what someone said is not paraphrasing, however short responses are often hard to paraphrase and some repetition may be necessary. We paraphrase so everyone in the group can hear what is said and then the person knows we are listening and interested in understanding their thinking. Art vocabulary and curricular concepts can be scaffolded to build students' understanding and specific kinds of thinking can be named (observing, comparing, connecting, puzzling, questioning, changing mind, extending, exploring, perspective taking, etc.).

**Examples:**

Response: *I see a brother, a sister, a mom, and a dad.*

Paraphrase: You notice a group of people who may be a family.

Response: *There is red, orange, and blue in this painting.*

Paraphrase: You're pointing out warm colors, like red and orange, and a cool color, like blue.

Response: *More of the flower is showing in this painting than in that one.*

Paraphrase: By comparing this painting to the other you see a difference in how much of the flower the artist chose to paint.

8. **Neutrality and Openness:** During a discussion you will hear a variety of responses – surprising, creative, off-the-mark, unusual, spot-on – and it is important to treat all comments with the same level of acceptance by avoiding praise for one idea and not for another. Neutrality emphasizes the importance of considering all possibilities. However, positive reinforcement is a great teaching tool and does not need to be avoided, but you must maintain praise for all comments throughout the discussion. If you say "good" after a comment, use similar affirmations consistently so all participants know their comments are valued.
9. **Conditional Language:** When paraphrasing or linking, use language maintaining that interpretation is open to multiple possibilities. Using words like *could be*, *might be*, *perhaps*, or *maybe* invites more responses from the group, as well as quietly asking participants to consider the proposed idea in relation to what they are thinking.

**Examples:**

- One possible relationship is that they are a family.
- You're wondering if this might be taking place at night because of the light.
- Perhaps the artist left this painting unfinished.

**10. Logistics:** Here is a list of logistical aspects to keep in mind

- a. Take a minute to look. – Begin each discussion with a full minute to let all participants look at the work. Guide their looking over the whole painting, encouraging them to look at large and small details. In addition to this being necessary to talk about what they see, this also gives a bit more time to those that are slower to develop their ideas.
- b. Thumbs Up – As a way to include more participants in a discussion we encourage the use of the “thumbs up” technique. When you ask a question that has an answer that others were likely thinking of as well (you’ll know by the faces of those who didn’t get called on) you can say, “Give me a thumbs up if you were also thinking that.” While not to be used with all questions, this is a great way for everyone to participate.
- c. Physical Movement – Encouraging kinesthetic engagement during the lesson provides another sense with which to experience the work of art. When asking participants to use their bodies in the gallery specify they should maintain enough space between other participants and especially between their bodies and works of art (see rules of acting in lessons that include tableau activities). And if you are in a tight space, avoid flailing arms for the safety of the participants, the art, and other visitors.
- d. Pronouns – Be mindful of when to use “we” or “us” instead of “you” when addressing the group. As you paraphrase it is likely that “you” is the best choice (or even better, and preferred, is using the participant’s name). During other times, the use of “we” and “us” sends the message we are all working towards something together. For example, “We are going to look closely at this painting.”
- e. Names – The rule of thumb for names is to always be as specific as you can. When referencing the artist use their name instead of “he”, “she”, or “artist.” Also avoid referring to the artist as “Mr.” or “Ms.”, using their first and last or just their last name is sufficient. When addressing participants, use their names as often as possible.

*Adapted from Art Around the Corner and Stories in Art, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.*