

Visual Thinking Strategies

All Grades

Teaching Strategies

What are Visual Thinking Strategies?

Visual Thinking Strategies—sometimes referred to as VTS—is an inquiry-based approach to teaching. No special art training is needed. In fact, the goal is *not* for the teacher to teach the history of a work of art but instead to encourage students *to observe independently and to back up their comments with evidence*.

The Approach

1. **Project or show a large image** that all students can see at the same time. This is preferable to having students look at an image in a book. Ideally, the work should *not* be abstract, and often the more going on in an image, the better.
2. **Ask students to look closely** for one or two minutes without initially sharing anything out loud with the group.
3. **Lead classroom discussion** with three recurring questions:

“What’s going on here?”

“What do you see that makes you say that?”

“What more can we find?”



Carle Van Loo, *The Arts in Supplication*, 1764. The Frick Art Museum.

Facilitation Tactics

- ✓ **Summarize the student’s response in a neutral way.** Wait until he or she is finished sharing an observation, then reiterate the response to the group so that everyone hears. This action also helps the group to process the comments while simultaneously leaving discussion open to other possibilities. Ex: *“Katie is saying she notices the people’s arms in the air, and she thinks this means they could be pleading to the people above.”*
- ✓ **Ask students to back up their observations with details in the image.** Stay rooted in the image. If students don’t do this automatically, ask them what they are seeing in the image that makes them think something. Over time, the group will pick up on this and begin to do this more spontaneously. Ex. *“Nick, you’re saying you think this scene is taking place a long time ago. What do you see in the painting that makes you say that?”*
- ✓ **Link responses together,** comparing and contrasting what students have said, even if it feels like what you’re saying is redundant. Ex. *“Katie told us she thought the people were pleading to the people above, and now Charlie is wondering if the artist wanted the figures above to represent something other than people. He says he wonders this because he notices that they are sitting in the clouds.”*
- ✓ **Try not to insert information** or your own interpretation. Let students look closely and reason out their responses, rather than discussing facts that you know outside of the conversation. If a student comes to a factually incorrect conclusion, gently correct it during your follow-up classroom lesson if necessary, but not during the VTS exercise.
- ✓ **Allow the conversation to flow,** even if it gets off topic. Remember, the goal at this stage is for you *not* to share information, but to encourage students’ critical thinking.
- ✓ **Follow up** with a more traditional, fact-based lesson now that students are more fully engaged with the subject. Be sure to link factual content with comments students made over the course of the VTS exercise.

For more information, background, and examples: <https://vtshome.org/>