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# Looking Deeper

## With Visual Thinking Strategies

By **Christina B. Connors**



*Norval Morrisseau, Androgyny, 1983, Aboriginal Art Collection, Gatineau, QC*

### TEACHING METHODS

Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, the story of every piece of artwork is in the imagination of the viewer. Teachers practicing Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) can use selected works to get a better understanding of what their students are thinking while simultaneously building students' critical thinking and observational skills. VTS is a method of inquiry that asks students to observe and comment on a work of art. VTS is an offshoot of Abigail Housen's (1999) work on aesthetic development. Although her original research was done in anticipation of outcomes for the art world, VTS can be used in a wide range of school subjects with favorable results.

#### How can you use VTS in your classroom?

VTS can be used for a variety of outcomes and across grade levels and class subjects.

- Hook students with an interesting image that relates to the class subject and get them talking about it.
- Assess what students already know through their comments during an informal conversation about the artwork.
- Build language skills by reframing student comments with correct grammar and more sophisticated wording.
- Spur critical thinking by asking students to support their opinion with evidence.

#### How does VTS work?

Ask the students what they see in the work of art, which puts the student in the role of "expert." Instead of asking the student to come up with the correct answer, you are asking them to share what they know. As students listen to one another, they begin to see that more than one correct answer, with multiple perspectives, is possible. When you ask the students to look for more clues in the picture, you are encouraging their observational skills. These skills have been shown to transfer across subject areas after students become familiar with the process (Huh, 2016).

### How can you implement VTS?

1. Select a work of art that is accessible to the class and has something going on in it.
2. Invite students to silently observe the work for a minute or so, giving them time to form ideas about it.
3. Start the conversation by asking "What's going on in this picture?" As a student makes their observation, point out what is being addressed in the work so that everyone can follow along.
4. Paraphrase the students' observation, correcting any grammatical errors and using appropriate vocabulary. This ensures that students understand what the speaker is saying, and it gives the speaker feedback.
5. Ask the speaker, "What do you see that makes you say that?" Encourage the student to give supporting evidence for their claim.
6. When the conversation has ended, ask, "What more do you see?" to the class, and move on to the next observation.
7. Throughout the conversation, keep an even tone, neither praising nor condemning anyone's ideas.
8. Thank students for participating at the end of the session.

### How do you choose a piece of art to view?

When selecting a piece of art for students to view, consider the audience: What subject matter might especially appeal to the age group or acknowledge their cultural background? Choose a piece that has a narrative; abstract art will not work for beginning viewers. Be sensitive to topics that might cause emotional upset to your particular population.

### What should you expect from VTS?

Using this practice requires getting comfortable with silence. When you first start using this technique, students won't know what to expect. Most students are used to being asked for the "correct" answer, so a new approach might take a little getting used to. VTS also will require you to share your status of "expert in the room." The rewards of which could be a better understanding of the students in your class and a more genuine learning environment.

Finally, while VTS can be a great way to begin a lesson, you have no guarantee that the conversation will go in the direction you anticipate. You must be prepared to alter your lesson based on where students take the conversation. The tradeoff is that you will be teaching a lesson in which students are truly engaged and interested. 🍏



**Ms. Connors** has been teaching Family and Consumer Science at Lakeland Copper Beech Middle School for 13 years. She attended the Visual Thinking Strategies Practicum at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2014. Ms. Connors aspires to create students who are as curious and excited to learn new things as she is.

### Resources

Visual Thinking Strategies (<https://vtshome.org>)

- Trainings in VTS offered nationwide.
- Subscription includes printable classroom materials, student assessments, facilitator reflection, and image curriculum for Grades PreK–8.

### References

- Housen, A. (1999). *Eye of the beholder: Research, theory and practice*. Retrieved from <https://vtshome.org/research>
- Huh, K. (2016). Visual thinking strategies and creativity in English education. *Indian Journal of Science and Technology*, 9(S1).



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