



Crocker All-Stars: Let's Talk—Discussing Art with Students

You don't need any special training to teach your students to appreciate art. Look at an artwork together, and have a conversation. Here are a few suggestions to help you feel confident.

A little knowledge goes a long way. If you have the chance, learn a little bit about an artwork you'll be discussing. Much of the most important knowledge comes from taking a careful look at the artwork yourself. You can also read up on the artist, the subject, the style and other artistic considerations. You might even read some analysis and opinions, but don't let them daunt you.

Ask questions and respond to your students' cues. Be ready to facilitate the discussion with a few well designed questions, and then listen and respond to what your students say. Ask follow-up questions based on their responses. Encourage your students to ask questions too, and try not to jump in too quickly with an answer. Responding with, "That's a good question. Does anyone have an idea about that?" keeps the discussion going and leads to an enriching experience for everyone. And don't be afraid to say you don't know the answer - facts can always be found later, if needed, and sometimes the "answer" is a matter of opinion, which everyone can share. You may want to ask your students, "How can we find the answer to that question?"

Play safe. Be sure your students know the difference between facts, which can be right or wrong, and opinions, which are all equally valid if they're backed up. Put an immediate stop to any comments that belittle someone else's ideas. Disagreeing is fine, but being disagreeable is not.

Don't feel you have to go deep. We often think we have to search for profound meanings and "see beyond" to find the artist's hidden purposes for an artwork. That can be interesting and even exciting, but it can also be intimidating and off-putting for many people. Beginning readers don't start with Shakespeare; learning to look at art is a skill that develops with practice and experience, and it's never too early or too late to begin.

Follow a simple pattern. One tried-and-true method for discussing an artwork follows this pattern:

Describe • Analyze • Interpret • Judge • Connect

The following pages detail each of these actions and provide some sample questions. Try this method during your next art talk.



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Henry David Thoreau said, “The question is not what you look at, but what you see.” Use the pattern below to help you and your students look and see.

- 1. Describe** The first step is to tell what you see, including the elements of art. Find them in the “Glossary of Art Terms.” Cognitive actions include identifying, naming, listing, recognizing, remembering, etc. *Sample questions might be:*
 - What are some items you see in this painting?
 - What colors do you see?
 - Describe the lines or shapes.
 - Is the scene indoors or outdoors? What in the painting makes you say that?
- 2. Analyze** Next, consider the principles of design, also found in the Glossary. Cognitive actions include comparing, inspecting, studying, applying, etc. *Sample questions might be:*
 - What catches your eye?
 - What gives variety to the artwork?
 - Is there a feeling of balance? What in the painting makes you say that?
 - How does the artist suggest movement?
- 3. Interpret** Begin to put your imagination to work. Cognitive actions include predicting, inferring, extending, conjecturing, etc. *Sample questions might be:*
 - Do you think this artwork took a long time to create? What makes you think that?
 - What do you think happened right before the moment in this painting? What might happen next?
 - Why do you think the artist chose this subject?
 - If you were a person in this artwork, how do you think you would feel?
- 4. Judge** Develop some informed opinions about the artwork. Cognitive actions include evaluating, concluding, justifying, summarizing, etc. *Sample questions might be:*
 - What do you like or dislike about this artwork? Why?
 - Are the elements of art and principles of design used effectively? What makes you say that?
 - Would you change anything about this artwork?
 - Does this artwork belong in a museum?
- 5. Connect** Establish some context for the artwork, with you personally and with the world at large. Cognitive actions include relating, associating, applying, contextualizing, etc. *Sample questions might be:*
 - What other artworks or personal experiences does this artwork make you think of?
 - What was happening in the world when this artwork was created?
 - Does learning about the background or the artist change your first reaction to the piece?
 - What special knowledge and skills did the artist need to create this artwork?

Every artwork will suggest its own specific questions. Be ready for them!