

Visual Thinking Strategies¹

Overview and How to Use VTS

Overview

An expanded set of skills is moving center stage with the Common Core Standards Initiative. Students will need to demonstrate their abilities to think critically, problem-solve effectively, reason clearly, listen constructively, and speak and write persuasively. Using the Visual Thinking Strategies protocol can increase student participation and engagement while deepening their thinking, language ability, writing skills, and visual literacy. VTS nurtures deeper learning, as a counterpoint to repetitive exercises and standardized tests.

VTS got its start at New York City's Museum of Modern Art in 1991 in response to a challenge from their Board of Trustees, who wanted to be certain visitors were learning from their education programs. What they discovered was that visitors didn't need to be given the answers to their questions, rather they needed permission to be puzzled and to think about what they saw. They needed consent to use their powerful eyes and intelligent minds, and time to figure things out for themselves -- to use what they already know to reflect on what they don't, which is the first step in learning. VTS became the process for helping museum visitors, and students, figure things out on their own.

How do we capture the attention of our students? First, we have their natural visual abilities and their innate habit of looking at what's around them. Second, is the nature of art. While we are all informed by innumerable images each day, little of it is categorized as art because of its complexity relative to, for example, an average news photo or snapshot. But much of what we see in art is common to daily experience. Art images depict people, places, things, expressions, interactions, moods, costumes, weather, spaces, light, colors: virtually all that we experience or imagine finds its way into art of various times and cultures. An important aspect of art is that feelings are embedded in it along with information, triggering a full range of responses from those who look at it thoughtfully.

VTS Process

Visual Thinking Strategies is an inquiry-based teaching protocol appropriate for all grade levels. You don't need any special art training to use this strategy. The goal is **NOT** to teach or preach or delve too deeply into the technicalities of each artwork, but rather to encourage students to observe independently, interpret what they see, probe and reflect on first and second thoughts, consider alternative meanings and to back up their comments with evidence. The range of plausible interpretations for any work of art allows us much leeway; most of what we think and feel can be justified if we take care and time to look, probe, and puzzle over what we see. We can find layers of meaning beneath what we think at first. Given time, we can recognize symbols and ponder metaphors.

Simply put, as facilitators you are helping students to:

- Look carefully at works of art
- Talk about what they observe
- Back up their ideas with evidence
- Listen to and consider the views of others
- Discuss and hold as possible a variety of interpretations

¹ The content for this introduction to Visual Thinking Strategies was taken from *Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines*, by Philip Yenawine, 2013, Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, MA; and www.vtshome.org

1. Ask students to **look closely and silently** at the artwork for a minute or two. Have them avoid reading the labels/artists statements right away as you want them to make their own observations instead of being led to conclusions based on the title or artists statements. Once the discussion gets going, you can invite them to look at the labels and then they can talk more about the artwork and what the artist is trying to convey.
2. Then ask students to **answer the following open-ended questions**, in this sequence. Listen intently to what students say, pointing to what they mention and responding to each comment, paraphrasing every student's comments. Finally, the facilitator links agreements and disagreements, while refraining from adding comments, correcting, or directing the students' attention.
 - a. Open with "**What's going on (in this picture, ceramic piece, etc.)?**" This initiates the inquiry into the meanings contained in the image: not just what's depicted but also what it conveys. Summarize student responses using conditional language, e.g. "Joe thinks this could be about..." This keeps the conversation open to other interpretations by other students. Remember, **ALL** responses are valid (provided they're being respectful).
 - b. You can then ask, "**What do you see that makes you say that?**" which is a non-threatening way to introduce reasoning; students must provide evidence for their interpretations. This encourages students to back up their statements with what they see in the work of art.
 - c. And finally you can ask "**What more can we find?**" which helps continue the conversation and deepens the meaning-making process. Repeated use of this question also reinforces the notion that no matter how quickly we think we grasp something, further observing and reflecting often enlarges or changes our initial thoughts.
3. The ways in which you **respond to student comments** is very important to the VTS process. You will actually point to the observed details and respond verbally to all student comments, paraphrasing each comment and linking one comment to others.
 1. **Listen carefully** to catch all that students say.
 2. **Point to what is observed** so that you're ensuring everyone else sees it too, keeping all eyes focused on the subject of discussion. This way, students also know you're seeing what they do, and if you don't, they can correct you.
 3. **Paraphrase** by accurately rephrasing each student's comments. Take a moment to reflect on what was said while formulating your response to make sure all content and meanings are grasped and helpfully rephrased. Your role is not to correct the student, but to simply provide another way to express what you just heard. This indicates that you not only heard the comment, but that you also understand what's been said. It's also a way to honor and affirm each student.

The importance of feeling understood can't be overstated. By taking the time to listen and reflect back what the students say, you are building all students' sense of feeling valued and capable. It has the added benefit of leveling the playing field; the risk of speaking up is reduced when students feel that you understand everyone and treat them all equally.

It is also important to use conditional language when paraphrasing, no matter how certain students are of their statements. For example, "Ok, so Kim is looking at this figure and thinking it's a homeless woman. What do you see that made you think she's homeless?" or "Ken is offering another interpretation, saying that this woman is wearing dirty and ripped clothes because she's been working in the garden we can see here in the distance. And you're saying that maybe we don't have enough information here to know for sure this woman's situation. What more can we find?"

4. **Link related comments** whether students agree or disagree, or build on one another's ideas. Pointing and paraphrasing indicate that individual contributions matter; by linking you're showing how ideas interact, making sense of a conversation that otherwise might seem random, or disjointed. By connecting ideas that agree, you make it clear that drawing similar conclusions is often appropriate: "It seems that several people see that..." By linking ideas that disagree, you're indicating that it's also possible for different people to respond differently to something they see: "We have a variety of opinions here..."
5. **Conclude by thanking students for their participation.** We often feel the need to provide closure to activities, to summarize. But if you maintain the stance that this isn't about right and wrong, but about thinking, and indicate through paraphrasing and linking, that students singly and together are capable of wonderful, grounded ideas, then summaries are superfluous. VTS conversations most appropriately end with a simple "thank you" and ideally a comment about something you, as the facilitator, learned from listening: "I was excited to hear how many details you noticed in this image, more than I had," for example, or "I had not thought about _____ in that way before, thank you."

Additional VTS Tips

1. It is important to facilitate in such a way as to stress respectful, extended examination and dialogue -- collaborative peer interaction. Let the students do the thinking, independent of you! They're exploring and probing for meaning, not medium, technique, or history.
2. Maintain a neutral stance throughout, which communicates important concepts, such as that you don't always need a teacher/authority to help you figure things out. Students learn that knowledge is created; it's not simply "delivered" by an authority.
3. Allow the conversation to go where it will, even if it gets off topic. Remember, the goal is not to give them information, but to encourage them to think for themselves.
4. Listening carefully is crucial. As teachers/facilitators our minds are usually on what's next, but you have to be present in the moment with the students to make VTS work.
5. Remember, there are NO wrong answers when talking about what one sees in a piece of art.

In summary, VTS gives students confidence and clarity that, with the help of peers, they can comprehend what they encounter around them, learn from it, and move on from a grounded position. Through VTS students do indeed learn a strategy they can and will employ without prompting, to make sense of what is unfamiliar both in art and objects of another nature (like fossils or scientific implements) probing what they see for more than first impressions. Deep encounters with visual art are useful in teaching people to think!

Thank you for being a facilitator and remember: Have Fun!