

Analyzing Art as Text

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Discussing works of art with students is central to arts study at all levels; artists learn, in part, from studying the work of other artists. Art teachers use visual examples to introduce students to a technique or skill; to investigate a particular theme or big idea; to consider the context of a certain time period or geographic location; and to otherwise inform students' own work and their understanding of the world more broadly. Teachers of the performing arts engage their students in similar conversations, using the experience of live or recorded performances as catalysts for discussion. In addition to considering the examples of professional artists, students of the arts critique their own work and the work of their peers, reflecting on creative choices.

Beyond its value to aspiring artists, the processes of observing and responding to works of art can strengthen all students' critical thinking skills. A 2006 study by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum found that students who routinely viewed and discussed works of art as part of the museum's school partnership program were more adept at *observing, interpreting, associating, comparing, and thinking flexibly* than were their peers who had not participated in the program. A similar study by the Guggenheim Museum found that students who regularly responded to and analyzed works of art had a greater capacity for *extended focus, hypothesizing, evidential reasoning, and considering multiple interpretations* when responding to both works of art *and* written texts. Both studies focus on elementary school learners; however, conversations about art with secondary school learners often follow this same pattern — facilitating extended observation leading to thoughtful, evidence-based interpretation — and can foster similar analytical skills. At the high school level, this is especially relevant, since the ability to closely read and analyze complex texts and to identify evidence to support claims are key components of the redesigned SAT.

It is, of course, not merely the act of showing students a painting, sculpture, or performance that produces these outcomes; results depend on the quality and depth of the conversations sparked by questions about the works. Although specific techniques may vary from one teacher or institution to another, the types of conversations that were found to foster critical thinking skills share a few key qualities:

- **Extended observation:** Prompted by a question as simple as *What do you notice?*, students are encouraged to look closely at the work of art for several minutes and thoroughly describe what they see before making any interpretive statements.
- **Guided interpretation:**
 - The educator asks a limited number of open-ended questions meant to encourage close examination. Questions may ask students to decipher the narrative suggested by the work of art, to hypothesize about the reasons for an artist's choices, or to look for

evidence of the geographical, historical, or social context in which the work may have been produced.

- In guiding the conversation, the educator offers additional information only when relevant and necessary to move the conversation forward — if he or she offers any information at all. In some cases, students rely on their own observations and ideas only.
- **Evidence:** Questions such as *What do you see that makes you say that?* Encourage students to ground their ideas in their observations of the work itself.
- **Avoiding judgment:** Students are expected to analyze and interpret the work rather than focus on their personal opinion of it.

The ability to form evidence-based interpretations about the art of others benefits students in their own art-making practice as they learn to ask interpretive questions of their own work: *What am I aiming to express? How am I communicating that? What evidence or indicators am I providing for my viewer?* In addition to promoting depth of thought and intentionality about one's own artistic work, the process of artistic analysis also naturally connects to other areas of the curriculum in authentic ways.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this inquiry process closely parallels the practice of carefully reading and interpreting a written text. Just as students can be expected to examine a work of art closely through extended observation and discouraged from basing their conclusions on mere like or dislike of the work, students taking the redesigned SAT are expected to closely read and analyze literature, history and social studies, and science texts and base their conclusions on what is stated and implied within the texts, not on prior knowledge or personal preference. Just as an art teacher might ask for evidence to help ensure that student observations are grounded in the work of art itself, the redesigned SAT includes some questions that require students to identify the portion of the text that serves as the best evidence for the answer to another question. Just as an art teacher might encourage students to consider the choices made by an artist, the redesigned SAT asks students to consider the choices made by an author of a text passage.

These parallels between visual and textual analysis are exciting, as they suggest that arts education is not only intrinsically valuable but can also serve as a model of inquiry for other subject areas in ways that build skills critical to student success on the redesigned SAT. Arts teachers may use a number of strategies to capitalize on these parallels, including

- sharing discussion techniques and questioning strategies with teachers in other subject areas;
- experimenting with aligning their instruction (for example, in terms of topic, theme, or ways of thinking) with instruction in other subject areas to create greater continuity between the disciplines;

- encouraging and facilitating the use and analysis of works of art as primary sources in the non-arts classroom, thereby drawing connections between art and textual analysis; and
- adapting research-supported strategies for selecting and interpreting texts to the process of choosing which works of art to study and how to approach them. These methods might include
 - choosing complex works of art that invite extended discussion and lend themselves to multiple evidence-based interpretations;
 - selecting multiple works by the same artist or multiple representations of the same person, place, event, time period, or theme in order to invite comparison and to build knowledge; and
 - revisiting the same work of art several times throughout the year, following different lines of inquiry each time and showing students that there are many lenses through which to view a single work.

The ability to analyze an image or text and offer a thoughtful, evidence-based analysis of it is as central to rigorous arts education as it is to learning in the English or history classrooms. By closely examining the skills that are measured on the redesigned SAT, educators across disciplines can engage in a common language to describe the habits that are authentically built in their classrooms, and find meaningful ways to relate these practices to one another.

Sources:

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