

## Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

### Introduction

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a fairly new approach to inquiry-based teaching designed for “beginning viewers” of art, both children and adults.<sup>1</sup> VTS is based on a body of empirical findings about how people grow in their understandings of art. In museums, VTS is a way of helping beginner and less experienced viewers grow in both confidence and the ability to derive meaning from art. It is based upon careful looking and facilitated group discussions in the galleries.

Acknowledging that art carries multiple meanings, VTS encourages group discussions that give rise to a number of reasonable points of view, in an informal, nonthreatening context. Young people and adults can explore ideas freely in a group—in effect solving a complex problem cooperatively.

VTS is the creation of cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and museum educator Philip Yenawine. Housen has spent over 20 years studying the ways people develop from novice to expert viewers. She developed a stage model, which illustrates five distinct patterns of thinking about art which she describes as aesthetic stages.<sup>2</sup>

### Housen’s Aesthetic Stages

#### Stage I

**Accountive** viewers are storytellers. Using their senses, memories, and personal associations, they make concrete observations about the work of art which get woven into a narrative. Here, judgments are based on what is known and what is liked. Emotions color their comments, as viewers seem to enter the work of art and become part of the unfolding narrative.

#### Stage II

**Constructive** viewers set about building a framework for looking at works of art, using the most logical and accessible tools: their own perceptions, their knowledge of the natural world, and the values of their social, moral and conventional world. If the work does not look the way it is “supposed to”—if craft, skill, technique, hard work, utility, and function are not evident, or if the subjects seem inappropriate—then this viewer judges the work to be “weird,”

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<sup>1</sup>Much of the information in this entry is drawn from various documents produced by Visual Understanding in Education (VUE).

<sup>2</sup>These descriptions of the stages come from the document “Housen’s Methodology and Stage Theory of Aesthetic Development” distributed by VUE (Visual Understanding in Education), 1998.

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lacking, and of no value. The viewer's sense of what is realistic is a standard often applied to determine value. As emotions begin to go underground, this viewer begins to distance him or herself from the work of art.

#### **Stage III**

**Classifying** viewers adopt the analytical and critical stance of the art historian. They want to identify the work as to place, school, style, time, and provenance. They decode the work using their library of facts and figures that they are ready and eager to expand. This viewer believes that properly categorized, the work of art's meaning and message can be explained and rationalized.

#### **Stage IV**

**Interpretive** viewers seek a personal encounter with a work of art. Exploring the canvas, letting the meaning of the work slowly unfold, they appreciate the subtleties of line and shape and color. Now, critical skills are put in service of feelings and intuitions as these viewers let underlying meanings of the work—what it symbolizes—emerge. Each new encounter with a work of art presents a chance for new comparisons, insights, and experiences. Knowing that the work of art's identity and value are subject to reinterpretation, these viewers see their own processes subject to chance and change.

#### **Stage V**

**Re-creative** viewers, having established a long history of viewing and reflecting about works of art, now “willingly suspend disbelief.” A familiar painting is like an old friend who is known intimately, yet full of surprise, deserving attention on a daily level but also existing on an elevated plane. As in all-important friendships, time is a key ingredient, allowing Stage V viewers to know the ecology of a work—its time, its history, its questions, its travels, its intricacies. Drawing on their own history with one work in particular, and with viewing in general, this viewer combines personal contemplation with views that broadly encompass universal concerns. Here, memory infuses the landscape of the painting, intricately combining the personal and the universal.

## **About the Stages**

These stages of aesthetic development are not determined by age. A person of any age with no experience with art will necessarily be in Stage I. An adult will not be at a higher stage than a child simply by virtue of age or education. Exposure to art over time is the only way to develop, and without both art and time, aesthetic development does not occur.

Over the course of her studies, Housen has found that most of the people she has interviewed are beginner viewers, ranging from Stages I to II or II/III (which is a transition between two stages). Even among frequent museum goers, there are relatively few people who have had sufficient interaction with art to have developed beyond the fairly basic understandings of Stage II/III.

## **VTS Teaching Strategy**

Housen's studies are the basis for the VTS model of teaching, geared to the Stage I and Stage II viewers. The strategy is very straightforward: you ask open-ended, developmentally-appropriate questions that are formulated to stimulate thoughtful responses. By leading facilitated discussions, you teach observation, critical and creative thinking, effective self-expression, listening skills, and group interaction.

The five basic "rules" of VTS are:

1. Allow a silent minute for looking closely at a work of art before asking any questions.
2. Ask the questions provided to initiate an active process of discovery and probing on the part of the viewers.
3. Listen carefully to and acknowledge every answer by looking with them, pointing and paraphrasing.
4. Facilitate the discussion as it progresses, linking various converging and diverging opinions and helping viewers to synthesize a variety of points of view.
5. Encourage further inquiry, keeping things open-ended and asking viewers to search for information outside their experience.

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#### **VTS: Step by Step**

- 1) Allow a silent minute for looking closely at a work of art before asking any questions.**

Give the group time to “mine” the picture on their own before the discussion begins. Model what you expect from the group by quietly looking at the picture with them.

- 2) Ask the questions provided to initiate an active process of discovery and probing on the part of the viewers.**

Begin with the first question, **“What’s going on in this picture?”** By phrasing it this way, the question suggests that the image is about something that can be figured out. It encourages the finding of stories or activities, playing into the natural behavior of beginning viewers to be storytellers. At the same time, the question allows comments of any sort—addressing colors, feelings, information, highly personal associations, whatever. The viewer is allowed to be him or herself.

Follow up with **“What do you see that makes you say that?”** This question asks that all opinions be grounded in visual evidence, visible to all. As viewers explain their observations and insights, they listen to each other, change their minds, and develop new ideas that go beyond their original ones.

Accept all interpretations as reasonable as long as they can be grounded in the viewer’s observations. Let group interaction sort out the “truth.” It usually does. To keep the conversation going, use variations on the basic questions such as “Who sees something else?” or “Does anyone see something different?”

You should remain neutral. This will facilitate the most fruitful conversations. If viewers ground their observations in what they see, they will more often than not coincide with what an artist intended.

Very young children may find it difficult to back up their responses with evidence. Accept their views as reasonable as it hurts no one. Let them talk and do not worry about repetition.

Keep the discussion moving forward by asking, “What more can you/we find?” This question highlights the fact that there is always more to discover about a work of art and provides an opportunity for participants to continue their observations.

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As viewers progress in experience, leading questions are added to the initial ones. These so-called leading questions, however, are still open ended. For example, “What more can you say about the people in this picture?” leads the group to focus the discussion on one aspect. Detail and nuance become the focus of discussion, building on the general brainstorming that precedes this probing of particulars.

### **3) Listen carefully to and acknowledge every answer by looking with them, pointing, and paraphrasing.**

In order to facilitate fruitful discussions (and to promote individual growth), it is critical that you acknowledge all responses in ways that feel supportive, and which signal to everyone that all responses are worthwhile. The sense that one will be heard and respected encourages participation.

Point and be physically expressive. Look at the person speaking. Nod; smile; do whatever seems appropriate to let the speaker know that you value his/her contribution. Use body language to make sure the viewing experience is active. Point to all that viewers mention in works of art so that everyone can see. Ask the visitor to point out what he/she sees if you don't see it.

Paraphrase each person's response. Paraphrase each comment as if you were saying, “What I hear you saying is...” By putting comments in your own words, you prove to them that their ideas make sense to you. Change only the words, NOT the content. Avoid rote repetition, as it becomes tedious.

### **4) Facilitate the discussion as it progresses, linking various converging and diverging opinions and helping viewers to synthesize a variety of points of view.**

Keep track of various strands of discussions. Acknowledge agreements and disagreements; you might say, “It seems that several people see that,” or “We have a variety of opinions here.”

Link thoughts. You might say, “One person thinks the woman looks sad; another person thinks this is because of her eyes.” Tracking discussions is difficult but worthwhile since it shows that you are listening and following along.

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#### **5) Encourage further inquiry, keeping things open-ended and asking viewers to search for information outside their experience.**

By answering questions you can keep the viewers active. Although beginning viewers have more to say than to ask, after a certain amount of experience curiosity develops. Adults depend on information more and trust themselves less, but even then, beginning viewers are more likely to believe what their eyes tell them than to accept someone else's view.

Try to anticipate some of the questions your viewers might have. When you get a question, your first response should be "Can we answer that by examining the work?" Or throw it to the group: "What do you think the answer to that might be?"

Depending on the question—such as, "Who is the artist?"—reply by asking, "Where can we look to find that out?" Always try to deal with questions in a way that reveals how one comes to gain knowledge. Help people learn how to find the answer rather than telling it. If you do tell them information that they ask for and can not find on their own during the tour, tell them how you learned the information. Explain that you learned it from a book, your training program, a television program, etc.

#### **Concluding a VTS Discussion**

Although there is no prescribed length of time for a discussion, 15-20 minutes is a good rule of thumb. Move on when you sense that the group has finished with an object. Strenuous efforts to bring closure to a discussion are not generally needed. Suggesting complete closure to a discussion is counterproductive in VTS.

To close you can ask, "What have we missed?" or "What don't we know for sure?" Or you can let them know how impressed you were by something they said or did, for example, how well they listened to each other.

**Relationship to  
Other Inquiry  
Strategies**

Try these techniques; they are a great way to hone all other kinds of inquiry skills. The VTS technique insists that you encourage viewers to look at the art work and express what they see. As with other inquiry-based teaching, with VTS you cannot control what direction in which the conversation will lead and you have to give up the desire to tell information.

Through the use of VTS you can develop the skill of accepting everyone's observations as valid. Sometimes by asking viewers to explain their responses based on what they see, they make you see many things in familiar art works in brand new ways.

Remember—your job as a discussion facilitator is to remain neutral. It is not to tell them what *you* know. It is very liberating.

Have fun with this!

Refer to the chart that follows for more information about the use of VTS on other kinds of tours.

## How Does VTS Relate to Other Tours?

A tour that uses *only* pure VTS (in which the docent does not introduce any information) is not appropriate for all tour groups. On regular tours, audiences expect you as the facilitator to share information about the objects; also many non-Western art works lack strong narrative content and/or prompt gross misinterpretation by visitors without the guidance of the tour facilitator. However, the pedagogical theory underlying the methods of VTS—that learning is developmentally driven and the good teacher listens carefully for clues about what the learner is ready to know—applies to all learning situations. The habits of active looking and active listening promoted by VTS provide those clues, and are essential elements of a meaningful learning experience with art.

<b>Pure VTS Tours</b>	<b>Other Tours</b>
<b>Goals for participants</b>	
Build upon the story-telling instincts of beginner viewers to foster engaging, meaningful interactions with unfamiliar works of art, to promote critical thinking skills and practice respectful group interactions.	Provide participants with experience looking at and engaging with art to find personal relevance and to gain insight into the diversity of art produced by various cultures across time.
<b>Art works used</b>	
Depictions of actions, settings, and emotions that are recognizable by and of interest to beginning viewers; strong narrative content; open to multiple interpretations	A well-crafted tour should include objects that are inherently interesting to the group, represent diverse cultures, and sample a variety of media. Many non-Western art objects are not appropriate for pure VTS because they lack narrative content and/or because they are culturally specific and not open to or appropriate for multiple interpretations.

These differences acknowledged, however, many of the methods employed in a VTS discussion may be fruitfully applied to other group discussions of works of art.

<b>VTS method</b>	<b>How does it apply to other tours?</b>
Begin with a moment of quiet looking	A quiet moment helps orient the group to the object they will be discussing and discover their initial observations. It encourages them to really look rather than simply rely on being told what they are seeing. The more they see for themselves, the more confidence they will have in their own ability to make sense of art.



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<b>VTS method</b>	<b>How does it apply to other tours?</b>
Open with the question, “What’s going on in this picture?”	Use this question ONLY when the work of art lends itself to an accurate reading. Do not use it if the group’s interpretation is likely to need “correction” or lead to cultural misinterpretations. Other generic open-ended questions to start a discussion might include, “What observations can you make about this work of art?” “What do you recognize here?” “What does this remind you of?” “How does this compare to what we just looked at?” “Based on what you see, how might this work of art relate to the theme...?”
Follow up participant responses with, “What do you see that makes you say that?”	When used consistently, the question encourages thoughtful comments that are grounded in the work of art. Try to maintain a genuine curiosity about the reasoning behind each observation to keep the question fresh.
Encourage further discussion with, “What more can you find?” or “Does anyone see something different?”	Use these questions to generate further comments that help you gauge the understandings and experiences of the group. It lets them know that the process of discovery isn’t over yet. Because your job is to integrate relevant information according to their interests, this is a great way to stimulate further thinking.
Paraphrase comments and point to details of the work of art as they are mentioned	This technique confirms that you have understood and value someone’s comment and helps others in the group to notice things they might not have noticed on their own. Paraphrasing also gives you the opportunity to introduce new vocabulary words.
Make links between the comments of different participants	Similarly, information you introduce should reference the group’s comments and observations.
Accept all comments as reasonable	Use “What do you see that makes you say that?” to understand the reasoning behind an interpretive comment. The reasoning behind interpretations should always be acknowledged, and contradictory information presented respectfully. “You’re really noticing the surface of this sculpture. The artist has treated it in such a way that it looks deceptively like metal, rather than the wood from which it is carved.” “Yes, that figure does seem to have some very feminine qualities. People who have studied this body of Kandinsky’s work connect the long hair and gown to Christ.” “Yes, many people believe/tend to see/associate this with...but in the artist’s culture...”

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<b>VTS method</b>	<b>How does it apply to other tours?</b>
Refrain from providing information group members do not already know or ask for	Refrain from providing information that isn't really helpful for understanding the work of art. Make new information relevant to the group by relating it to an observation they have made. Continue to exercise judgment regarding what information will be interesting to your audience and will enhance their understanding.
Dispel the notion of teacher as expert	Find ways to reinforce the idea that information comes from a variety of places by indicating the source of your information. "I learned this from a book about..." "People who have studied this say..." "You can learn more about this by..."