

Docent Program Handbook: Learning Styles

Each museum visitor has a unique pattern for picking up new information and processing it, called a **learning style**, or **cognitive style**. When presenting works of art to a group it is important to recognize some of the bigger differences you will find among group members:

Modality Preference Differences

Learning style preferences range from *seeing*, to *hearing* about and discussing, to physically *touching* what they are learning. Therefore, it is important to use a variety of ways to teach about any work of art.

Visual learners do well by looking at the art work. Be sure that the work is visible to all, and in some cases write down key words or ideas you want them to remember. Having students (younger and older) use paper and pencil to copy a pattern is also helpful to visual learners. As you ask questions about the work, you are helping the **auditory learners** in the group. Be sure to paraphrase throughout and repeat the main points of your discussion at the end of the session, so that **non-auditory learners** have several chances to process the information. For **kinesthetic learners**, pass touchable props or have them participate in improvisational activities, such as imitating shapes or actions in a work of art. These learners cannot sit still in one place for very long, so attention to the pacing of your tour is especially important for them.

Field Sensitivity Differences

Some visitors are better at finding details in the art work. They will see more and make more connections. Others will need more help in knowing where and how to look. This style is not intelligence related. You will need to give very clear suggestions how visitors can look for information in order to meet all the perceptual needs of your group.

Cognitive Tempo Differences

The **impulsives** are the first to raise their hands or blurt out an answer to a question. For more reasoned responses, allow ample “wait time” so that the **reflectives** can construct their answers after considering all the alternatives. If you can recognize the impulsives in your group, call on them for reactions and follow-up responses to the reflectives’ answers.

Locus of Control Differences

The most responsive visitors, the ones who actively answer your questions, are more likely to have an **internal** locus of control. They do not need great amounts of praise or prodding from you. The **externals** in your group, however, need all the prompts you can give. You will probably have to call on them by name, being sure to positively reinforce any attempts they make at answering your questions.

Conceptual Level

Formulate your questions according to the degree of structure various members of your group need in order to learn. For some individuals, you can ask more complex, elaborative, open-ended questions and expect high-quality responses. For others, you will need shorter questions. Try to assess the level of your group as quickly as possible.

Risk-taking Differences

Some learners are more willing to take guesses than others. It is important to build risk-taking as a viable learning strategy; hence, you are encouraged to ask many open-ended questions. But you must be open and accepting of all responses. It takes time to build an atmosphere of trust in which both your high and low risk takers will attempt something new. Your attitude will make all the difference in how far your group will go in exploring new ideas about a work of art.