

Types of Open-ended Questions

Descriptive (look)

What's going on in this picture? (When there is an obvious narrative.)

Describe what you see that tells about: subject, setting, medium, color, shape, line, texture, space, composition, materials used, etc. (Ask a few of these; ask one at a time.)

These questions draw the viewer in to find responses based on the visual evidence.

Pissarro, Place du Theatre Français, Paris: Rain

What's going on in this picture?

Describe the weather in this scene. What do you see that makes you say that? or What visual evidence do you have?

Van Gogh, Olive Trees

What colors do you see?

Describe the colors you see in this painting.

How do the colors used in this painting differ from the colors in the painting we just looked at? (can lead to a discussion of Post-Impressionism)

Interpretive (explore)

Why do you think the artist made these choices?

What are the ideas or feelings communicated? What do you see that makes you say that?

What do you think is the work's purpose or function?

These questions ask the viewer to contemplate meanings of the images and back them up with visual evidence.

Schiele, Portrait of Paris von Guttersloh

How do you think the artist feels about the man in this portrait?

Why do you think the artist used these particular colors?

Duluth Room

What can you tell about the people who lived here from the things that you see?

What kinds of activities might take place in this room?

Associative (relate)

How does the work relate to your life?

How would you enter into or interact with it?

What do you think about the ideas expressed in the work?

These questions can lead to a new way of looking at something that a viewer may not have thought of before. Use them to enhance understanding, not to distract or lead attention away from the work.

Duluth Room

What would you do in this room?

How is this room different from your living room?

Hmong skirt

What kinds of clothing do you wear on special occasions?

Hmong Story Blanket

If you made a story blanket that told about your life, what activities would you include?

If you were one of the people depicted in this story blanket, what would you like to be doing?

Descriptive Questions

Description questions can be answered by looking at the work of art. They often involve the subject matter or the visual elements used, such as color, line, or shape. These questions and appropriate follow-up questions encourage tour participants to make observations and support them with evidence from the art works being discussed. Some description questions encourage viewers to describe the subject or action of an art work, while others ask the viewers to analyze or describe how the elements are organized within the work.

Examples

- What's going on in this picture/sculpture? What do you see that makes you say that? (from Visual Thinking Strategies)
- What kinds of animals do you see? Where do you see the dog? What other kinds of animals do you see?
- If you could touch this sculpture, how do you think it would feel? What do you see that makes you think it would feel like that?
- What do you think the weather is like in this scene? What do you see that makes you say that?
- How does the color in this painting differ from the color in the painting we just looked at?
- What kinds of lines does the artist use in this work? Where do you see those types of lines?

Interpretative Questions

Interpretation questions help tour participants explore the meanings of works of art. They require viewers to offer opinions that can be upheld by evidence from the art object. These questions offer the possibility for divergent opinions and the guide remains open to all responses.

Examples

- Why do you think the artist used red instead of green for these trees? What do you see that makes you think that?
- Why do you think the artist left so many open spaces in this sculpture? What do you see that makes you say that?
- How do you think the artist feels about the woman in this portrait? What do you see that makes you say that? Does anyone else view it differently? How do you view it?
- Why do you think the artist decided to make the people in this sculpture so big/small? What do you see that makes you say that?
- What do you think the man and woman are smiling about? What do you see that makes you say that?

Associative Questions

Association questions ask viewers to consider to what extent an artist's viewpoint or a work of art has application to their own opinions, lives, and/or times. Association questions can be fun and provocative and can help people relate the works to everyday life. However, avoid overusing this type of question as it can get group members (especially young viewers) far away from the art work itself. Ask associative questions after the work has been carefully explored and various interpretations of the visual evidence have been discussed.

Examples

- What aspect of your life today seems like life as shown in this room? What seems different?
- What is similar or different about the environment/landscape/weather in this picture and the environment/landscape/weather here in Minnesota?
- If you could take this sculpture home with you, where would you display it? Why?
- What do you like most about this painting? Why? What do you like least? Why?