

Best Practices for Tours and Art Carts

Tips to Engage All

Avoid gender binaries (boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen) in addressing groups, as we are becoming a more gender-fluid society. Instead, use inclusive terms such as “you all,” “students,” “second-graders,” “everyone,” etc.

Body language (such as smiles, eye-contact, and open gestures) help make a group feel welcome and drives engagement on tours or at Art Carts.

If you are at an Art Cart, standing (if you are able) when engaging with visitors helps energize the conversation and often leads to more engagement.

At the start of a tour, slow it down and start with simple, easy questions (opinions, not guessing right answer). These types of questions allow all to contribute quickly and sometimes in a nonverbal way.

- Thumbs up – thumbs down.
- Allow some questions to be answered with hands or body posture or pose.
- How many think this..., how many think that...
- Ask “I wonder...” and “Imagine...” types of questions, to spark curiosity (for example, “Imagine you were in this painting. Where would you want to go?”)
- Scale of 1-10 (e.g., “How realistic do you think this leopard is, on a scale of 1 to 10?” Then ask them to explain their answers.)
- What’s one thing/word...

Try pair-share, especially if your group is quiet. Allowing them to share with each other may open them up to more engagement later in the tour. Pair-share also allows all to have an opportunity to participate on a tour.

If students come with name tags, use their names. If you are unsure as to how to pronounce a name, ask how to pronounce it. Using names on tours really does help connect to the students and encourages greater engagement with questions.

Ask, “Who haven’t I heard from?” (and other variations of this).

Open-ended questions accommodate divergent perspectives. These types of questions encourage visitors to make observations or generate ideas. If you ask a question that has a brief and predictable answer, the question is close-ended (such as “Who is this person?”).

Closed-ended questions often ask visitors to recall factual information, so they do not stimulate reflective thinking and can shut down discussion in a group. Open-ended questions encourage multiple answers, involving more of your group, and lead to greater engagement during the tour.

Paraphrasing allows all in the group to hear responses you receive and is a dynamic expression of your engagement with the group. It also lets you make connections between observations from the visitors.

To allow all to quickly participate, ask some questions that can be answered with hands or body posture/pose. For example, when looking at an object with patterns, ask everyone to make a shape with their hands that they see. This technique also can be used to replicate poses in paintings or sculptures.

Tips to drive more visitor engagement

With a quiet group of students, make one of the students a “docent” at an object, to ask questions of their classmates. This can really help engage a group again.

After you ask a question, wait! Don’t take the first response. Wait time lets children and adults draw together ideas and insights.

Use associative questions that allow visitors to form connections to the objects and deepen discussion. For example, at *Bear Chance*, ask “what ads or billboards did you see on your way to the museum today?” At ceramic objects, ask “who has made something out of clay?” and then “what did you make?”

To encourage close looking, “follow” the color through the painting. Ask the visitors to pick a color, then let their eyes follow the color from the top to the bottom or bottom to the top. Then ask them to share the color they chose and describe the path their eyes took in the painting. This could connect to information you wanted to share about the use of color in an artwork.

With groups of older students who do not want to talk--but are wearing name tags--try working in the use of their names in non-threatening ways at first. Like, “If you look over to the side of the painting, where Chris is standing, you’ll see that detail.” That may help drive more participation when you do ask questions. Use their names as much as possible in the first part of the tour.

At the end of the tour for a school group, ask “What was your favorite object?” in lieu of a big conclusion. Allow the chaperones to answer, too! This lets people think back over all that they saw.

Scaffold your questions. Allow time at the start of a tour for “easy” or “warm up” questions. Ask simple description questions or opinion questions, to allow visitors to start feeling comfortable offering their thoughts and opinions. Then you can scaffold questions through the tour, to ask more interpretive and associative questions with later objects.

Use a flashlight to focus attention on details in an artwork. Otherwise, groups tend to become disengaged if they do not understand where you are pointing. It is hard for them to answer questions effectively. This also brings you too close to the artwork and doesn't model good museum behavior--to stay a foot away from the art!

On the art carts, take turns with your partners to escort people into galleries by the cart, to connect from the objects on the cart to the objects in the galleries. For the Japan art cart, the brushes are a good prop to use for people to consider how some of the marks are made on the paintings--so asking, which brush would you choose for this line or this area (looking at the sample scroll).

For adult groups, less is more in object selection, especially if you use some open-ended questions that involve perspective-taking. If asking these questions, allow enough time for meaningful conversation and for people to have a chance to look, process, and answer.

Allow opportunities for visitors to compare/contrast to make connections on your tour or connections from an art cart to a nearby object.

Themes and transitions provide structure on a tour and make it meaningful to visitors. Keeping the theme alive through questions and transitions provides an important framework for your visitors, especially on Highlights tours.

Make connections to visitors' lives. Work in associative questions!

On Art Carts, consider the artworks around you an extension of the cart. Activate the space around the cart to have conversations connected to the objects, based on experiences visitors may have had with objects on the cart.

For Art Carts, foster connections with visitors' experiences. Conversations with visitors often lead them to share their experiences with travel and other life events, and these conversations lead to their appreciation of an artwork or artist.

Group Management

Keep children seated on the floor whenever possible. This redirects their focus to the guide/docent and the conversation.

If you are working with an object that is hard to see or difficult to pull in students to look at it, move on to another object in the museum.

Chaperone management! In your tour introduction, reach out to the chaperones, reminding them of their responsibilities. Continue to call on them for help throughout the tour.