

THE ELABORATION GAME

A routine for careful observation and description

Directions:

As a group, observe and describe several different sections of an artwork.

1. One person identifies a specific section of the artwork and describes what he or she sees. Another person elaborates on the first person's observations by adding more detail about the section. A third person elaborates further by adding yet more detail, and a fourth person adds yet more. Observers should only describe what they see and hold off on giving their ideas about the art until the last step of the routine.
2. After four people have described a section in detail, someone else identifies a new section of the artwork and the process starts over: Four more people take turns making increasingly detailed observations. Then the process starts over again, and so on, until everyone in the group has had a turn or all sections of the artwork have been described.
3. After the artwork has been fully described, as a group, discuss some of your ideas about it. For example, what do you think is going on? (And what did you observe that makes you say that?)

Helpful definitions:

Observe: Describe how something appears.

Elaborate: Expand on something in detail.

Interpret: Explain what something means.

What kind of thinking does this routine encourage?

This routine encourages students to look carefully and deeply at details. It challenges them to develop verbal descriptions that are elaborate, nuanced, and imaginative. It also encourages them to distinguish between observations and interpretations by asking them to withhold their ideas about the artwork – their interpretations – until the end of the routine. This in turn strengthens students' ability to reason carefully because it gives them practice making sustained observations before jumping into judgment.

When and where can it be used?

Use this routine with any kind of visual art that stays still in time, such as painting or sculpture. (There is an adapted version of this routine for use with music.) You can also use the routine with non-art

objects, such as a microscope, an animal skeleton, or a plant. The routine works especially well with objects or works of art that have some degree of complexity.

The Elaboration Game is an especially good way to launch a writing activity because it helps students develop a detailed descriptive vocabulary.

What are some *tips* for starting and using this routine?

Decide ahead of time whether you want to have each student speak in turn, or whether you want students to raise a hand and offer their observations at will. Don't worry if the routine feels a bit awkward the first time you try it. It is challenging to look at things deeply, and it sometimes takes students a while to make new observations and find fresh ways to describe things. Give students lots of "think time" and they'll soon get the hang of it.

How should sections of the artwork be identified?

There are two ways to handle this. You, the teacher, can decide how to divide the artwork up into different spatial sections—quadrants, for example--and then tell students which sections to describe. Or, students can identify different sections themselves. Either way, be flexible about what counts as a section. For example, a section can be a smaller area of detail within a larger section that has already been discussed.