

# Types of Open-Ended Questions

An inquiry strategy outlined in *The Great Books Foundation* training manual has been adapted for discussing works of art using three basic categories of questions: description, interpretation, and association.

The following is a summary of the question types and some examples of each.

## Description Questions

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

### Examples

- What's going on in this picture/sculpture? What do you see that makes you say that? (from Visual Thinking Strategies)
- How would you describe the figures in this work? What kinds of animals do you see?
- If you could touch this sculpture, how might it feel? What about the texture makes you say that?
- What do you think the climate/weather is like in this scene? What in the picture makes you think so?

## Interpretation Questions

Interpretive questions help tour participants explore the meanings of works of art. They require viewers to offer opinions that can be upheld by observable evidence. These questions offer the possibility for divergent opinions and you should remain open to all responses.

### Examples

- How do you think the artist felt about this woman? What do you see that makes you say that? Why do you think the artist chose to place her in the back of this scene?
- Why do you think the artist left so many open spaces in the sculpture? Why might the artist have chosen wood instead of stone or metal?
- How do you think the artist feels about her home, New York City, by this painting? What do you see that makes you say noisy and fast? Consider the colors she has used to depict the city; what do they say about how she felt?

## Association Questions

Associative 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. Associative questions can be fun and provocative and help people relate artworks to everyday life. However, avoid overusing this type of question since

they can get group members (especially young visitors) far away from the artwork itself. Typically, you ask these after the artwork has been thoroughly explored and various interpretations have been discussed. However, sometimes an associative question at the start of discussion can help spark a discussion (e.g., “What about this Chinese Reception Hall is similar to your living room at home? What is different?”).

### Examples

- If you could take this sculpture home with you, where would you display it? Why?
- What do you like most about this painting? Least? Why?
- If you lived in this house, what kinds of activities would you do in this room?
- What kind of animal would you choose to represent you?

### Comparison and contrast

And last but not least, consider incorporating opportunities for your group to compare and contrast during the tour, either with objects on the tour (e.g., “How does the color here compare to the last painting we saw?”) or with objects close by the selected object (e.g., “What are some similarities in all these ceramic figures? What are some differences?”). This type of question allows visitors to make some connections that could illuminate information you may then share about the artist or culture.

### Tips for Successful Inquiry on Tours

- Ask open-ended questions that encourage multiple responses.
- Ask follow-up questions that encourage even closer looking and invite individuals to support their observations with evidence.
- Ask questions that are appropriate for the group (consider age, experience with looking at art, language skills, cultural background, etc.).
- Avoid run-on questions.
- Avoid asking “yes or no” questions. These types of questions stop a discussion as soon as the responses are given.
- Avoid asking questions that begin with “Can you. . .” or “Who can. . .”
- These types of questions automatically set participants up to fail if they “can not”.
- Embrace moments of silence. Allow people time to observe, process and respond.
- Listen to responses and treat all serious responses as equal even if you think some are not the “right” answers.
- Paraphrase when appropriate.
- Be flexible enough to let participants’ responses determine how the discussion of an artwork will unfold.