

## Observation/Interpretation

The Observation/Interpretation thinking routine supports students in developing meta-cognition, or thinking about their thinking. The routine encourages students to express their impressions of and assumptions about an artwork and identify the details that contribute to those impressions. They not only make meaning from what they see, but also develop awareness of how that meaning is constructed through visual evidence. Observation/Interpretation allows students of any age or level to practice inferencing and evidential reasoning, essential learning skills across the curriculum.

### Grade Level

Adaptable for all grades

### Common Core Academic State Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1](#)

### National Visual Arts Standards

- Responding: understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning
- Connecting: relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context

### Suggested Art Images

Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Museum's website:

- [Breaking Home Ties](#), 1890, by Thomas Hovenden
- [Figures in a Landscape](#), 1972–73, by Sidney Goodman
- [Portage](#), 2000, by William Kentridge
- [Still Life with a Ham and a Roemer](#), c. 1631–34, by Willem Claesz. Heda
- [Sugar Cane](#), 1931, by Diego Rivera
- ["Tar Beach 2" Quilt](#), 1990, by Faith Ringgold
- [The 1920's... The Migrants Arrive and Cast their Ballots](#), 1974, by Jacob Lawrence
- [The Life Line](#), 1884, by Winslow Homer

### Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Look closely and carefully to describe what they see.
- Distinguish what they see from what they think about what they see.
- Connect specific visual evidence to inferences and interpretations.



*Sugar Cane*, 1931

Diego Rivera (Mexican)

Fresco

57 1/8 inches x 7 feet 10 1/8 inches (145.1 x 239.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Cameron Morris, 1943

1943-46-2

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### Materials Needed

- Screen for projecting images
- Whiteboard or chart paper for recording
- Observation/Interpretation worksheets
- Writing materials

### Lesson Process

1. You may use any of the suggested artworks for this lesson. Preview them before teaching, and select one that will be most accessible, engaging, or relevant for your students. If your selected artwork has a Teacher Resource, read it to learn more (see [Supplementary Materials](#) below).
2. Explain to students that they will be looking closely together to describe and make meaning from an artwork. They are going to focus on their reasoning and be specific about what they see that shapes their understanding of what's going on.
3. Introduce the essential language for this lesson: "observation" and "interpretation." Make sure students understand that an observation is what they see, while an interpretation is what they think about what they see. For example, when you *observe* or see dark clouds in the sky, you might *interpret* or think that a storm is coming.
4. Pass out the Observation/Interpretation worksheet. Students will use this sheet to record their thinking. Display a large Observation/Interpretation chart on your whiteboard or chart paper.
5. Project your selected artwork for students to see, and allow a few minutes for looking. Try to conceal the title until you reach the end of the exercise so as not to influence students' thinking. Ask for a volunteer to share something they notice. The class will help decide if it is an observation or an interpretation. Is it something they can see, or something that they think? Did they hear seeing words or thinking words?
6. Record the observation or interpretation in the appropriate column of your chart, and have students do the same on their worksheets.
7. Now, ask them to extend their thinking. If the student shared an observation, what inferences can be drawn from it? Can they elaborate and add more detail? If the student shared an interpretation, what visual evidence supports it? Record student responses under Observation or Interpretation. Draw lines or arrows between entries in the two columns, to show how observations and interpretations are connected.
8. Model this process with students a few more times, and then allow them to work independently. Encourage them to visually represent the connections between their observations and interpretations. Circulate and answer questions or give support as needed.
9. Give students a chance to share out. What do they see in the artwork? What does it make them think? How are they showing those connections? Let students know that it's fine if they disagree with each other, as long as they can support their arguments with visual evidence.
10. Ask students to look back at their worksheets and reflect on the discussion. Are there examples of multiple or even conflicting interpretations based on the same evidence? Are there examples of more than one observation pointing to the same interpretation? What can they learn from that? What new ideas or questions do they have about the painting?

### Differentiation

You can easily adapt this lesson for early childhood by replacing Observation and Interpretation with See and Think, or What do we see? and What do we think? Instead of having students fill in their own worksheets, complete a class chart together. Select one of the simpler scenes, like *The Life Line*, that will be accessible for your students.

### Extension Activities and Assessment

1. Paintings like *Still Life with a Ham and a Roemer* and *The Life Line* are excellent prompts for younger students to practice narrative writing. Ask students to imagine what might have happened right before this scene, or what might happen next. Have them draw the "before" or "after" scene in the sequence of events and write a short narrative telling the story. Remind them that their narratives should follow a logical sequence of events based on their understanding of the painting.
2. *Breaking Home Ties* and "*Tar Beach 2*" provide good opportunities for students to imagine multiple perspectives. Have students "step inside" a character from the artwork and imagine seeing, thinking, and feeling from his or her point of view. Students can write a short, first-person, inner monologue about the scene based on their observations and interpretations.
3. More ambiguous works like *Portage* lend themselves to multiple interpretations and debate. Divide your class into two groups, and assign each group a different idea about the artwork. One idea might be that the characters are marching in a parade. Another might be that they are refugees fleeing their homes. Have each group record as much visual evidence as they can to support their idea and present the evidence in a debate. At the end of the debate, ask students to reflect on the experience. Do they see anything different or new in the artwork now?

### Troubleshooting

While learning to separate what they can see from what they think, students are likely to express some assumptions as observations. For example, they may assume that the characters in *Breaking Home Ties*, *Figures in a Landscape*, or "*Tar Beach 2*" are families. Or they might take it for granted that the workers in *Sugar Cane* are enslaved people. Talk them through their evidential reasoning when this happens. Ask, "What do you see that makes you think that?" or "Is there visual evidence to support that thought?" Record the visual evidence under Observations and the assumptions under Interpretations.

### Supplementary Materials

Teacher Resources for [Suggested Art Images](#):

- ["Tar Beach 2" Quilt](#)
- [Breaking Home Ties](#)
- [Portage](#)
- [Still Life with a Ham and a Roemer](#)
- [Sugar Cane](#)
- [The Life Line](#)

## Observation/Interpretation

Take a few minutes to look closely at a work of art. Use lines or arrows to connect your thoughts and ideas to specific observations.

<b>Observation</b> What do you see? Make many observations. Describe what you can see:	<b>Interpretation</b> What is going on? What do you <i>think</i> about what you see? Write down your thoughts and ideas about the artwork: