Artful Thinking: Elaboration Game

The Artful Thinking approach encourages active looking and learning through the practice of short, simple thinking routines. These routines help students focus on specific aspects of an artwork and organize their observations and ideas. The repetition of thinking routines across subjects and disciplines supports students in developing not only the skills for inquiry, but also the habits of an inquiring mind.

The Elaboration Game helps students learn to distinguish between what they see and what they think by deliberately slowing down the process of noticing and describing. It also empowers students to build understanding from their own careful observations and connections. Use this routine as you would use close reading to develop the habit of looking intentionally and attending to details, patterns, and structure before making meaning.

Grade Level
Adaptable for all grades

Common Core Academic State Standards
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5
- 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:
- Moon over the Yamaki Mansion: Spearman Kagekado Battling Kanetaka, 1886, by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi
- Portrait of Anthony Reyniers and His Family, 1631, by Cornelis de Vos
- “Tar Beach 2” Quilt, 1990, by Faith Ringgold
- The Marriage of the Virgin, with the Expulsion of Saint Joachim from the Temple, the Angel Appearing to Saint Joachim, the Meeting at the Golden Gate, the Birth of the Virgin, and the Presentation of the Virgin, 1475-95, by the Master of the Tiburtine Sibyl
- Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge, 1879, by Mary Cassatt

“Tar Beach 2” Quilt, 1990
Faith Ringgold (American)
Multicolored screenprint on silk plain weave, printed cotton plain weave, black and green synthetic moire
66 x 67 inches (167.6 x 170.2 cm)
Purchased with funds contributed by W. B. Dixon Stroud 1992-100-1
© 1990 Faith Ringgold
Lesson Objectives
Students will be able to:

- Carefully notice and describe many details of a work of art.
- Look past first impressions and withhold interpretation.
- Use reasoning to construct evidence-based interpretations.

Materials Needed
- Screen for projecting Suggested Art Images
- Color copies of selected images (optional)
- Greyscale copies of selected images (optional)

Lesson Process
The Elaboration Game can be used with any of the artworks suggested in this lesson, or with other images you have available. Use the same criteria you would use in selecting a text for close reading to select an image that’s right for this routine. See Supplemental Information at the end of this lesson to learn more about using each of the Suggested Art Images listed above.

An Elaboration Game image needs to be sufficiently complex to provide plentiful details for students to notice and grapple with. At the same time, it should also be developmentally appropriate and accessible. Students will need both the vocabulary and the prior knowledge to successfully describe and interpret what they see. Don’t share any information about the artwork or artist before completing the routine. Even knowing the title can bias students’ thinking in a specific direction and close off other paths. Finally, a little ambiguity is a good thing. The Elaboration Game is an authentic opportunity for “a-ha!” moments, when students feel the excitement of constructing their own understanding based on direct observation. For this to happen, the story told by an image can’t be too straightforward. Nuanced visual storytelling encourages curiosity and reasoning and allows students to draw their own conclusions.

1. Introduce the Elaboration Game. Explain to students that they’re going to describe an artwork in sections, until they’ve noticed as many details as they can in each section. Dividing the artwork will help them focus on noticing details rather than interpreting the whole image. Challenge students to wait until the very end to interpret, or say what they think is going on in the image.

2. Students of any age might benefit at this point from reviewing the difference between noticing or observing (what they see) and interpreting (what they think about what they see).

3. Project the image of your selected artwork. You may also want to make copies of the artwork in greyscale, so that students can mark up the sections or make notes about their observations.

4. Decide how to divide the selected image. You might determine ahead of time what the sections will be and simply tell students how to divide the image. Or you might analyze the composition together and decide what sections make the most sense. Either way, be flexible. There is no right or wrong way to identify sections.

5. Choose a section and begin describing. Ask a volunteer to share something they notice in that section of the artwork. Continue calling on volunteers to elaborate on the description of that section until you’re satisfied that students have noticed all the important details.

6. Move on to the next section, and continue the elaboration process until the whole artwork has been described. Encourage students to listen carefully to each other throughout the routine so they can build—or elaborate—on each other’s descriptions.
7. After the entire artwork has been thoroughly described, invite students to share their ideas. What do they think is going on? What do they see that makes them think so? Students will have had ample opportunity through the process of elaborating to develop nuanced interpretations based on strong visual evidence.

8. Wrap up the routine by asking students to reflect on the process. What was challenging about this routine? Was it hard not to jump to conclusions right away, and why? How did focusing on observation and description help students understand the artwork? How did listening to and building on the descriptions of other students contribute to their understanding?

Troubleshooting
Be prepared to play the role of “interpretation referee,” reminding students to hold their interpretations until the very end. This can be genuinely difficult until they get the hang of separating what they see from what they think. For instance, students might automatically name the adult woman in the Portrait of Anthony Reyniers and His Family as the mother without realizing how much they’ve inferred from the setting, the composition, and her relationship to the other characters in the painting. When this happens, redirect students’ attention to the visual evidence by asking, “What do you see that makes you say that?”

Extensions
The Elaboration Game’s usefulness is not limited to visual art. Once students are familiar with the routine, try using it as a strategy for approaching any kind of complex visual information that might be overwhelming taken as a whole. You could use it to approach a math problem, scientific diagram, map, or primary source document. In short, the thinking habits associated with the Elaboration Game empower students to construct their own understanding of any unfamiliar and complex visual artifact.

Supplemental Information
- Moon over the Yamaki Mansion: Spearman Kagekado Battling Kanetaka will spark the curiosity and imagination of younger students. The image is dense with bright colors, patterns, and textures, while the characters and action are relatively simple. The challenge will be guiding students to describe the spearman’s opponent as a shadow or form, rather than jumping to conclusions about who or what it is. Ask questions about the color, size, and shape of the opponent to prompt students’ descriptions. Do they notice the main character’s helmet perched on his spear as it extends outside the frame? Encourage them to explore how this detail works in the artwork and in the story it tells. The Elaboration Game would be a perfect introduction to a writing activity inspired by this image. For more information, see our teaching poster.

- The Portrait of Anthony Reyniers and His Family may seem like a straightforward depiction of a wealthy family in their home. But the Elaboration Game is likely to reveal students’ assumptions about gender and provide opportunities for debate informed by visual evidence. The small child in a brown dress on the left is not a girl, but a boy who has not yet reached the age of breeching, or wearing trousers. In Western cultures, between about the mid-1500s and 1900, it was customary for all young children, regardless of gender, to wear gowns or dresses. Putting on trousers for the first time was a rite of passage for boys and may have marked the point at which a father became more involved in child-rearing. Is this painting a commemoration of that moment in the Reynier family’s life? What visual cues does the artist provide that this child is, indeed, a boy? Do students notice the symbolic objects (bread and fruit) held by the daughters of the family? What might be the significance of those objects? Encourage students to question their assumptions and develop well-reasoned interpretations.
• The composition of Faith Ringgold’s “Tar Beach 2” Quilt, with its floral patterned border and distinct realms of action marked out by line and color, lends itself to a conversation about identifying sections. The scene depicted on the quilt is rich with narrative details. Once students discover that the children lying on the rooftop are also the children flying above the city, it will be hard to reign in their interpretations. For this reason, you might strategically begin describing with the triangular rooftop section in the foreground. Encourage students to notice every detail of this vignette that describes the characters, their setting, and what they're doing. What time of day is it? What is the weather like? How can students tell? What are the clues that the scene is happening on a rooftop? Do students notice the mismatched chairs and the laundry drying on lines? Make sure they describe the clothing worn by each character. By the time they get to interpreting the figures in the sky, they will be able to support their ideas with lots of visual evidence. Students will likely notice, but not be able to read, the snippets of text in the sky. Validate the noticing, and then encourage them to elaborate on other things they see. Because this artwork is not downloadable from the museum website, color and greyscale reproductions are provided at the end of the lesson.

• The Marriage of the Virgin, with the Expulsion of Saint Joachim from the Temple, the Angel Appearing to Saint Joachim, the Meeting at the Golden Gate, the Birth of the Virgin, and the Presentation of the Virgin might initially appear to have two clear sections, divided between the marriage scene in the foreground and the action in the middle and background. Look closer, and you will see that there are actually five distinct scenes in the middle and background, comprising episodes in the Biblical story of the Virgin Mary’s life. Because of the subject matter, this artwork is more suitable for use with older students, who will enjoy discovering all the clues. How do they know that the scene in the foreground is a wedding? Do they notice that the wavy, golden hair and dark gown of the bride match the hair and dress of the little girl on the temple steps? Can they find everywhere Mary’s father, Joseph, appears in the image and track his narrative arc? Even students who are not familiar with this Biblical story will be able to build an interpretation based on careful observations.

• Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge is another great option for sparking younger students’ curiosity. Help students build to the realization that they’re looking at a mirror image by starting to describe in the foreground of the painting, with the woman seated in the red chair. Make sure they notice all the details about her dress and hairstyle that also appear reflected behind her. What do they think the setting of this painting is? What do they see that makes them think so? Where do they think the other spectators reflected in the mirror are seated? Bring in mirrors for students to play with and create similar scenes to support their ideas.
“Tar Beach 2” Quilt, 1990, by Faith Ringgold (Purchased with funds contributed by W. B. Dixon Stroud, 1992-100-1)
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