Generating Questions to Explore a Work of Art

The more questions we generate around a problem, a text we want to explore, or a work of art, the richer our exploration and the answers we come to can be. This activity encourages students to build habits of mind around creative questioning as they work to generate multiple questions about a work of art and then use those questions as a basis for discussion.

Grade Level
Grades 6–12

Common Core Academic State Standards
• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.1
• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.1.b
• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.7
• CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1c

Pennsylvania Academic Standards
• 9.3.B

National Visual Arts Standards
• Artist Process – Responding: Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning

Art Images Required
Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Images that are also available in the Artstor Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase.

• Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War), 1936, by Salvador Dalí
  Artstor: 1950-134-41

Alternate images
• Carnival Evening, 1886, by Henri-Julien-Félix Rousseau
  Artstor: 1963-181-64

• The Life Line, 1884, by Winslow Homer
  Artstor: E1924-4-15
Lesson Objectives

After participating in this lesson, students will be better able to:

1. Generate creative, imaginative, and expansive questions about a topic.
2. Cite visual evidence to support their claim.
3. Participate in a discussion by finding connections between questions, responding to other students’ questions, elaborating on ideas, and staying on topic.

Materials Needed

- Screen for projecting images
- Pencils
- Index cards, post-its, or scrap paper (five per student)

Lesson Process

1. Display Dalí’s Soft Construction with Boiled Beans. Explain to students that they are going to stretch their questioning muscles by looking at this work of art together. The more you look and see and think about a work of art, the more questions you can construct.

2. Pass out five cards to each student. Explain that their challenge is to try to think of five questions about this work of art.

3. This painting usually brings many questions to mind so little prompting is needed to begin question generation. To get started, ask if one of two people can share the first question that came to mind as they look at this painting and what it was that made them think about that question?

4. Give students a few minutes to look at the image. Encourage them to wander around the painting with their eyes. Notice details, look all around, and see what kinds of questions start coming up. Instruct students to write one question they have one each card.

5. If students are getting stuck, encourage them to think in a new direction. For instance, if they are asking “how” questions, have them try some “why”, “what if,” or “who” questions.

6. After students have generated their questions, put all of the question cards in the middle of the floor. Have students start looking at the questions on the cards to find questions that seem to go together—questions that seem to be about the same idea, that about the same part of the painting, the same type of question, etc. Have students sort the questions into groups.

7. After the sorting, have students take a minute or two to look over the groups of question cards and think about: Which questions are like the ones you asked? Which are different from yours? Which are surprising to you or make you think about the painting in a new way?

8. As a group, notice the trends in the questions. What kinds of questions are being asked?

9. Now that there are many questions generated about Soft Construction with Boiled Beans, the class can use the questions to explore the image. Invite each student to choose any question card that interests them (it doesn’t have to be their own) and bring it back to their seat to discuss the image.

10. Have students share their questions with the group. For example: “Is the creature smiling or grimacing?” Ask students what they see that would generate this question. Ask them to identify what
else they see in the work that helps us think about this question. To move forward, you might ask: “Does anyone have a question that connects with this one in some way?” Continue exploring the image through student’s questions. Depending on class time, you may need to choose to explore only a few questions as a group.

Assessment
1. Ask students to reflect on the experience of generating questions about this work of art. How did their questions change as they tried to think of questions past the first one or two? What questions did others generate that took them in surprising directions or made them think about the work of art in a new way?
2. As an extension discussion: How is the process you just completed similar to what you do to solve a math or science or other problem?