

Visual Thinking Strategies — How To

Quick Background

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is an inquiry-based teaching method developed by Philip Yenawine, a museum educator, and Abigail Housen, a cognitive psychologist. Enabling discussion of works of art among young people develops skills of observation and interpretation. Viewers are called on to articulate their responses and to find evidence to support opinions and reasoning. During discussions they listen to the views of others, build on the group discussion, debate different views, and change opinions. In short, **VTS** combines most aspects of critical and creative thinking as well as verbal expression.

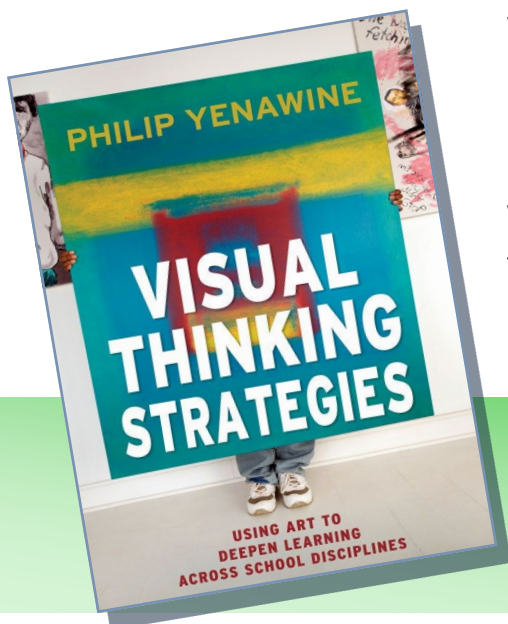
How to Select Images

Original work of art with an obvious, concrete theme or narrative.

[Students should be able to correctly read the image using prior knowledge. Hence, an image dealing with another culture's custom, with which students aren't familiar, would not be an appropriate work of art for this technique.]

How to Use VTS

The following questions can provide stimulating, lengthy, rich, and insightful discussions. **VTS** is designed to be easy to use regardless of the facilitator's own art background. Begin by selecting a work of art large enough so that students can view it together.



1. Lead a discussion with students while looking at the work of art. Encourage them to take time to explore the artwork and respond to the following questions:

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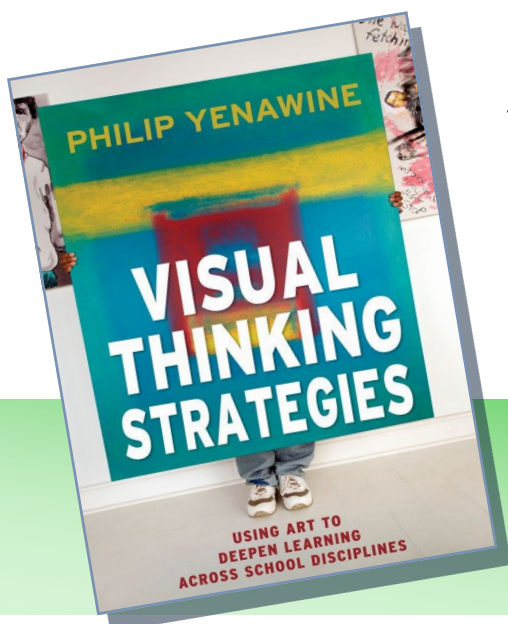
- ▶ **WHAT'S GOING ON IN THIS PICTURE?**
- ▶ **WHAT DO YOU SEE THAT MAKES YOU SAY THAT?**
- ▶ **WHAT MORE CAN YOU FIND?**

2. As a group, have the students share their observations. Listen to the student responses and reflect back what they have said. As students state their observations and as you paraphrase, gesture toward the subject being described. Accept all interpretations as long as they can be grounded in the student's observation, which is the purpose of the question: **"What do you see that makes you say that?"**

Though you might be tempted during the discussion to add comments or direct students' attention, refrain from providing information. All observations should be driven by student responses. Your restatement or paraphrasing of student responses is a good time to impart new vocabulary terms or clarify ideas.

3. Continue to discuss and encourage a variety of responses from your students, "What more can you find?" Repeat the question until you have motivated the students to look carefully at the artwork.

The three questions are not sequential, the engagement can go back and forth. The first question starts the engagement; the second is a follow-up to each observation the viewer does not support, as an invitation to go deeper; the third question can continue the conversation with further observations, keeping the process going and going back to the second question; or if there are no other observations, the unanswered third question acts to close the engagement.



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Evaluation/Assessment

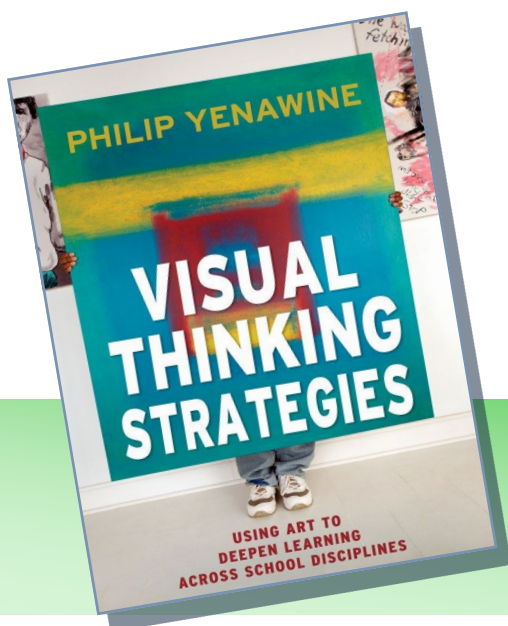
Group assessment for this activity can be measured through the depth of discussion and complexity of verbal expression. Repeat **VTS** with additional images and, after several discussions, compare student responses with responses from the original discussion. Additionally, students can respond individually to the **VTS** questions and record their answers for written assessment.

Curricular Connections

During the discussion, students may ask questions that require more information about the artist or the artwork. Keep a list of questions for after the discussion. Allow students to choose a question to research and report to the class. This activity can be expanded to connect to language arts, social studies, or other curricular areas or activities.

Comments

Responding supportively and neutrally to students' comments is essential to this process. Paraphrase their answers by using responses such as, "What I hear you saying is..." Be sure you understand them. If you're unclear, ask them to repeat their answer. While accepting all responses, acknowledge points of agreement and disagreement. Not everyone will think all answers are correct, but the group discussion will usually sort things out.



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VTS Facilitation Method 101

In **VTS** discussions, teachers support student growth by facilitating discussions of carefully selected works of visual art.

Teachers are asked to use three open-ended questions:

- ▶ **WHAT'S GOING ON IN THIS PICTURE?**
- ▶ **WHAT DO YOU SEE THAT MAKES YOU SAY THAT?**
- ▶ **WHAT MORE CAN WE FIND?**

3 Facilitation Techniques:

1. **Paraphrase** comments neutrally
2. **Point** at the area being discussed
3. **Linking and framing** student comments

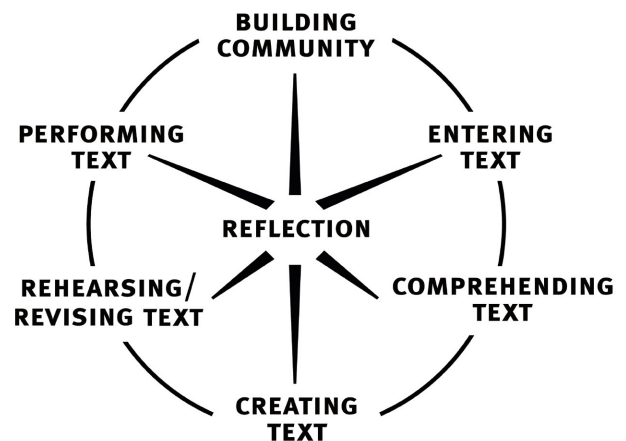
Students are asked to:

- **Look** carefully at works of art
- **Talk** about what they observe
- **Back up** their ideas with evidence
- **Listen** to and **consider** the views of others

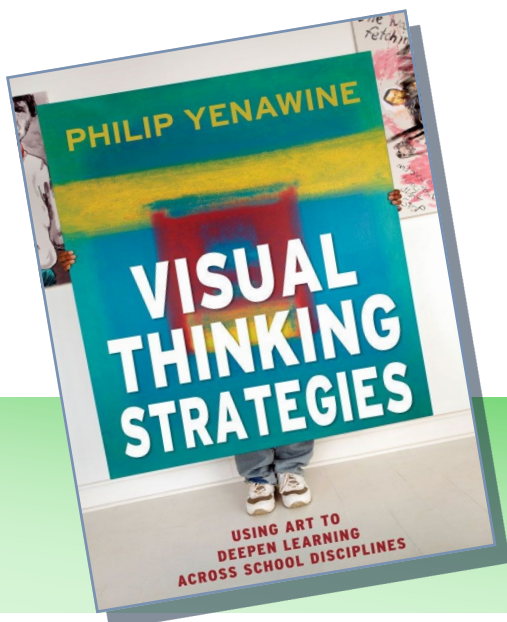
Teacher Tips

You can use **VTS** at multiple points in the **Performance Cycle**, including **Building Community**, **Entering Text**, and **Comprehending Text**

You can use **VTS** as a daily **bell work exercise**



Remember, your “text” can be visual, text-based, or even a fossil, artifact, tool, anything that benefits from close observation, drawing inferences, multiple points of view



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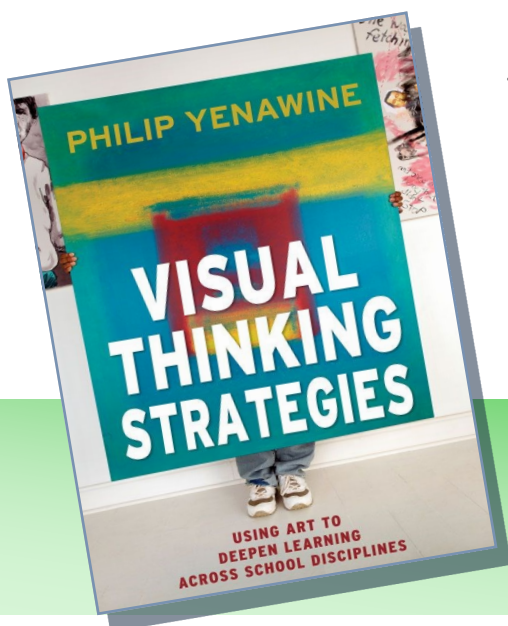
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What is VTS? Brief Overview

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a method initiated by teacher-facilitated discussions of art images and documented to have a cascading positive effect on both teachers and students. It is perhaps the simplest way in which teachers and schools can provide students with key behaviors sought by Common Core Standards: thinking skills that become habitual and transfer from lesson to lesson, oral and written language literacy, visual literacy, and collaborative interactions among peers.

VTS provides a way to jumpstart a process of learning to think deeply applicable in most subjects from poetry to math, science and social studies. Art is the essential first discussion topic because it enables students to use existing visual and cognitive skills to develop confidence and experience, learning to use what they already know to figure out what they don't; they are then prepared to explore other complex subject matter alone and with peers.

Through **VTS'** rigorous group 'problem-solving' process, students cultivate a willingness and ability to present their own ideas, while respecting and learning from the perspectives of their peers. Engaged by contributing observations and ideas, the students participate in VTS-based lessons in ways they often don't in others. **VTS** is a curriculum for schools; as a method of discussion, it is used in many art museums.



Experience with **VTS** produces growth in all students, from challenged and non-English language learners to high achievers. In addition, teachers enjoy the process and benefit from a new approach that reaches all students and is useful across their practice.

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VTS Resources

These handouts are adapted from the Visual Thinking Strategies website
<http://www.vtshome.org/>

Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines by Philip Yenawine. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2013.

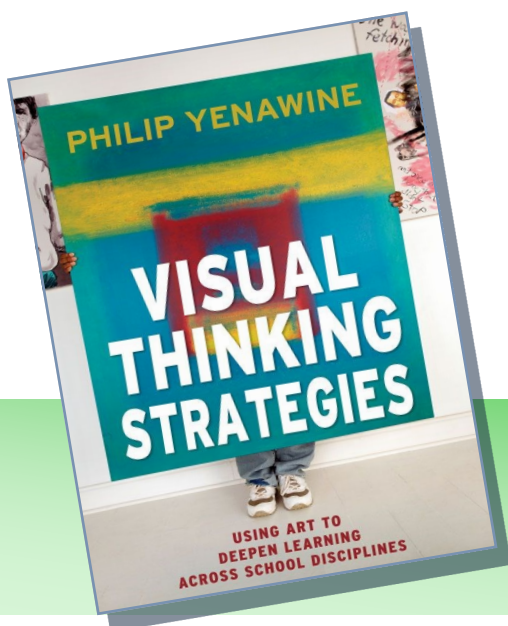
<http://hepg.org/hep-home/books/visual-thinking-strategies>

VTS Vimeo Channel — Instructional Videos

<http://vimeo.com/vtsvimeo>

VTS Research

<http://www.vtshome.org/research>



“You don’t have to convince me of the power art has to open the mind to new ways of seeing and thinking. I’m sold on Visual Thinking Strategies. This insightful book unpacks a technique that transforms classrooms into engaging, exciting laboratories for the critical thinking and communication skills our children need to master.”

— Daniel Pink, author of *To Sell Is Human* and *A Whole New Mind*

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