

Artful Thinking: What Makes You Say That?

The Artful Thinking approach, designed by Project Zero at Harvard University, presents strategies that offer teachers ways to successfully engage students with the visual arts through the use of close observation and critical thinking skills. Two other Artful Thinking strategies can be found within our list of lesson plans. You can also find out more about Project Zero and Artful Thinking Strategies [here](#).

The thinking routine called “What makes you say that?” is designed to encourage deep observation, followed by an explanation of support that is the basis of critical thinking. Building explanations for observations promotes evidence-based reasoning. Further, listening to the reasoning offered by classmates allows students to understand alternatives and multiple perspectives associated with 21st Century Learning Skills. This lesson also scaffolds to a more sophisticated version of the strategy, asking students to make a claim from their observations, support that claim, and develop further questions from their preliminary work.

Curricular Areas

English Language Arts, Visual Arts – Aesthetic Response

Grade Level

Best for elementary, but scaffolded to all grade levels

Common Core Academic Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-Writing.CCRA.W.3](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Writing.CCRA.W.10](#)
- [CCRA.SL.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.7](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Speaking and Listening.CCRA.SL.4](#)

National Visual Arts Standards

- Artistic Process: Responding: Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning



Railroad Bridge, Argenteuil, 1874
Claude Monet (French)
Oil on canvas
21 3/8 x 28 7/8 inches (54.3 x 73.3 cm)
John G. Johnson Collection, 1917
Cat. 1050

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.

- [“Tar Beach 2” Quilt](#), 1990, by Faith Ringgold
Artstor search: 1992-100-1
- [Railroad Bridge, Argenteuil](#), 1874, by Claude Monet
Artstor search: Railroad Bridge Money Philadelphia
- [Mariposa](#), 1983, by Edna Andrade
Not available on Artstor (any abstract will work)

Lesson Process

1. Display for the class an image of the quilt *Tar Beach 2* by Faith Ringgold, and have students spend a minute observing closely. This should be quiet time as they look.
2. Ask, "What is happening here?" As students respond, follow each observation with the question, "What do you see that makes you say that?" Paraphrase student responses and follow-up to flesh out ideas. (If needed to spur conversation, ask observation-based questions such as "Who are these people?" or "What is the setting?" etc.)
3. Once the questioning pattern has been set, break the class into small groups of three. Each group should continue the process of observing and questioning, with someone designated to record the group's responses. At the end of this activity, the groups should report one or two observations (along with accompanying explanations) to the class.
4. Some observations lead to ideas that are not easily supported. For example, a student may comment on the financial status of this family saying, "This family is poor" or "This family is well-off." These statements are more theories than observations. Ask the class for other examples of ideas such as these that are not so easily supported. List one or two. Explain that these ideas are not really observations, but rather claims (or hypotheses) which arise from observations. Whenever possible, all claims should be supported. Can these claims be supported in any way? The first step would be to look further at the object to see if there is supporting evidence. However, sometimes the search for support has to extend beyond the object. Ask the class how they might further research this quilt.
5. This quilt is an image from the children's story by Ringgold, *Tar Beach*. As the class reads and learns about this book, they can see how Ringgold uses the images to present Cassie's story, and can also probably support or disprove their earlier claims. Note for the class that they have just followed the basic plan for most scientific research: observe; form a hypothesis; research other sources to support the hypothesis.
6. Display for the class the painting *Railroad Bridge, Argenteuil* by Claude Monet. Follow the "What makes you say that?" process described above. After recording some responses and explanations from students, ask them to offer an opinion about the scene. Their questions should be framed as "I think . . ." rather than "I see . . ." Write a few of these opinions for the class. Note that these opinions really are the same as the claims from step 4. Ask students to explain how they could support one of these opinions. Then, ask what new questions come to mind as the students consider their opinion/claim. (The Claim/Support/Question process is another Artful Thinking routine that naturally follows the "What makes you say that?" routine.) "Claim," "opinion," and "hypothesis" are used synonymously here. Note that in most research, the term hypothesis is preferred.
7. Break the class back into their small groups, and have them attempt to develop additional claims, or hypotheses, about *Tar Beach 2* or *Railroad Bridge, Argenteuil*. Someone in the group should take notes about the group's claims, their supporting statements, and their questions, to later share with the class.

Assessment

1. [Younger] Have students develop additional claims, or hypotheses, about either *Tar Beach 2* or *Railroad Bridge, Argenteuil*. Using a chart or narrative form, they should record their claims, supporting statements, and questions.
2. [Older] Students should be able to put into their own words the purpose of these Artful Thinking strategies. In a brief essay, describe the steps in this lesson and the purposes or goals of each step.

Answer the question: "How can this same process be used with projects other than an interpretation of works of art?"

Enrichment

1. Research further to try and answer questions developed by the class for *Tar Beach 2* above. Note how your research was conducted (what process, what sources, etc.).
2. Can these techniques be as effective for abstract works of art? Pull up the image *Mariposa* by Edna Andrade, and follow the steps above. As an alternative, any abstract work can be substituted (the more abstract the better).