

OBSERVATION ACTIVITIES

The following list offers a variety of ideas to encourage observation:

- Ask open-ended questions, such as, “What do you see?” or “What do you notice?” rather than questions that have a specific or correct answer.
- Give students a specific observation question and have them share what they notice with a partner. Once students have had a few minutes to share in pairs, encourage them to share what they have observed with the larger group.
- Challenge students to make a list, either alone or in pairs, of at least 10-15 things they notice about the artwork. Make sure their lists are long because the first five or so items will be the most obvious things noticed and listed.
- Ask students to sketch the artwork or their favorite part of the artwork. Be sure to remind them to look carefully and tell them that this activity is about careful looking, not making something beautiful.
- Ask the following questions: “What do you see?”, “What does it make you think about?”, and “What does it make you wonder about?” Ask students to share their observations about the artwork using phrases like “I see..., I think..., I wonder...”
- Ask students “What is going on?” and follow with “What makes you say that?” This helps students describe what they see or understand and asks them to think of possible explanations. This promotes evidence-based reasoning and encourages students to understand alternatives and multiple perspectives.
- Have one student identify a specific section of the artwork and describe what he or she sees. (You may want to use an empty frame to highlight the particular area of study.) Ask another student to elaborate on the first student’s observations by adding more detail about the section. Ask a third student to elaborate further by adding yet more detail, and so on. After four people have described a section in detail, another student identifies a new section of the artwork and the process starts over. Increasingly detailed observations are made until everyone in the group has had a turn and the artwork has been described.
- Encourage the students to tell the “story” of the artwork. Begin the growing narrative with, “I am going to start a story with one sentence.” Have the students add to the story with their sentences. You may want to write down the class story of the artwork and read it aloud at the end of the activity.
- In an effort to encourage imaginative exploration, choose one of the following questions: “If this artwork is the beginning of a story, what might happen next?”, “If

it is the middle of a story, what might have happened before?”, and “If this artwork is the end of a story, what was the story about?” This uses the power of narrative to help students make observations and use their imagination to elaborate on and extend their ideas. The emphasis on storytelling also encourages students to look for connections, patterns, and meaning.

- Have students look at the artwork quietly for at least 2 minutes. Ask them as a group to list 10 words or phrases about any aspect of the artwork. Write down these words or phrases on a board. After engaging students with a brief discussion based on their responses, ask for 10 more words or phrases and follow with similar discussion. This activity allows students to push beyond first glances and the obvious.
- After the students have had time to observe the artwork, ask them to describe the colors, shapes, lines, and/or textures in detail. Ask questions based on their observation of the basic elements of art, such as, “Which element do you think was the most important to the artist when he did this work?”, “What would happen if all of the blues were changed to bright red?”, “Imagine this work five times bigger. What would it do to the work?”, “If all of the smooth lines were bumpy, how would it change the way you think about the artwork?” etc.
- Cover up the artwork image. Ask students to choose a partner. Have one student in each pair turn his or her back to the image. Uncover half of the artwork and ask the student who is looking at the artwork to fully describe the piece to his or her partner. Then cover the remaining half of the image and repeat the process with the students’ roles reversed. Then uncover the image and ask all of the students to look at the entire artwork. Have them answer questions, such as, “What did you imagine the remaining portion of the work to look like?” or “What words in your partner’s description helped you to *see* the second half of the painting?” This activity promotes imagination and encourages an understanding of the importance of using accurate, descriptive words.
- Once your students have gained an understanding of the Elements of Art, divide the students into small groups and pass out “elements paint sticks.” (These are paint sticks that you’ve picked up at your local hardware store and on which you’ve printed/illustrated the elements of art. You may want several sticks for each element, depending on the size of your groups.) Ask each group to discuss several ways they think the artist used the element listed on their paint stick. Have them choose one person in their group to be the spokesperson in sharing their discoveries with the class.
- Resource: Some ideas adapted from *Artful Thinking*, Harvard Project Zero.