

# Visual Thinking Strategies: Writing about the Arts

Columbia College Chicago  
Writing Center/Learning Studio

# Visual Thinking Strategies

“ Visual Thinking Strategies is a tool many educators use to enhance students’ cognitive abilities.

“ Psychologist Rudolf Arnheim connected visual perception to thought into what he called “visual thinking.”

“ He thinks that one act of cognition results from identifying what we see visually, and that we are engaging our thinking as we decipher what we see.



# Visual Thinking Strategies

“ In college courses, especially at Columbia College Chicago, you will be tasked with writing about various forms of art.

“ By adapting the pedagogy of Visual Thinking Strategies, this tutorial will help explain how to look at art when you begin to write about it.

# Visual Thinking Strategies

“Writing about art is all about asking questions about the art and answering them yourself.”

“In visual thinking strategies, there are three key questions, which this tutorial will consider.”

Consider the following image. Take a minute to look at it silently.





Kindergarten, Lesson 6, Image 2  
Paul D'Amato, *Girl Reaching for Rose*, Boston, 1998.  
Enfacolor print, 23 x 35 in.  
The Reader's Digest Art Collection. © Paul D'Amato.



When writing about art, you might want to consider keeping a running jot list by your side. After viewing the art, answer the following question:

**What's going on in  
this picture? (You  
may adapt this to  
“What's going on in  
this piece?”)**



**What's going on in  
this picture?**

“ This wording is important, as it urges the writer to probe the art for meaning.

“ The phrasing also assumes that the art is “about” something, and it allows for open-ended comments.

**What's going on in  
this picture?**

- “ In the image before,  
think about what's going  
on in the picture.
- “ Proceed to the next slide  
and take notes.





Kindergarten, Lesson 6, Image 2  
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Enfacolor print, 23 x 35 in.  
The Reader's Digest Art Collection. © Paul D'Amato.



Sample notes for  
“What’s going on in  
this picture?”

“ A girl is standing on her porch’s railing/banister, reaching out for a rose on a tall growing rose bush.

“ The young girl, on her way to school, maybe second grade, decides to collect a rose for some reason.

“ The girl is waiting for someone to walk her to school.



What's going on in  
this picture?

“In these examples (and remember, these aren't the only things to notice in the art—we will all notice different things), I grounded my interpretation in the visual piece because of the question I asked.

“The next question will show why this is important.

**What do you see  
that makes you say  
that?**



# What do you see that makes you say that?

“ Ask this to yourself after taking the initial notes of what you think is going on in the piece.

“ This is where you gather evidence for your opinion.

“ This is how you support your ideas and will be able to argue your point.

“ It will all be grounded in the art itself, keeping the discussion in your writing anchored firmly to the work.

“ This is because different things you notice might not be what another person notices in the piece, so you'll want to prove why you think a specific way.

**What do you see that  
makes you say that?**

**“Look at the art again and  
take notes while  
considering this  
question, “What do you  
see that makes you say  
that?”**





Kindergarten, Lesson 6, Image 2  
Paul D'Amato, *Girl Reaching for Rose*, Boston, 1998.  
Enlarged print, 23 x 35 in.  
The Reader's Digest Art Collection. © Paul D'Amato.



Sample notes for  
“What do you see  
that makes you say  
that?”

“ She’s wearing what appear to be school shoes (penny-loafers) and a school dress, perhaps a school uniform. She’s presentable, but she’s not wearing holiday clothes nor is she super dressed up, so she might not be going to church.

“ She’s smiling, so she’s not upset. She’s not collecting a rose because she did something wrong.

“ The houses look like they’re single-family homes in a city because they are very close to each other and separated by a fence. Neither house looks to be in bad condition, but the girl’s house’s banister needs to be repainted.

“ She is really motivated to get the rose, as her body is positioned as closely as she can be to safely reach for the roses.

“ The roses grow sparsely on a small flower trellis, which shows that the girl probably lives in a city—there’s not much land for a large garden.



**What do you see that  
makes you say that?**

**“ We take what we’ve  
decided is going on in  
the piece and we’ve  
given reason why we  
think that.**

**“ Now, we have the final  
question that helps spur  
our own discussion of a  
piece.**

**What more  
can we find?**



# What more can we find?

“ We ask this to complete our writing on the art piece.

“ If you think of writing as a “conversation” with your readers, you’re completing the conversation.

“ You look for all of the details for why you think a certain way.

“ You complete a thorough examination of the piece, making all connections you possibly can.

**What more can we  
find?**

**“Look at the image and  
consider what else you  
can find.**





Kindergarten, Lesson 6, Image 2  
Paul D'Amato, *Girl Reaching for Rose*, Boston, 1998.  
Enfacolor print, 23 x 35 in.  
The Reader's Digest Art Collection. © Paul D'Amato.



# Sample notes for “What more can we find?”

“ I’m interested in what this image suggests. Is there a theme the photographer was going for, or was he simply looking at a moment in someone’s life?

“ If I were a photography student, I might consider the angle of the photograph and the way the image is composed in my analysis. I’d try to bring my own discipline into the image. If I were a fiction writer, I might consider what kind of story the image tells.



# Visual Thinking Strategies

“ Make sure, when taking notes and before you write, to acknowledge every comment you might make.

“ There might be some that don't fit in your paper at the end of the note-taking, but you want to allow yourself to have as many observations and interpretations of the art as possible so that you have a fully-rounded paper.

“ Draw links among your different strands of thought. What seems to agree among these? Disagree?

“ Asking these questions of art allows you to see how thinking can unravel and how you can discover meaning within a piece of art.

# Visual Thinking Strategies



# Visual Thinking Strategies

“ So, when looking at a piece, consider the following questions:

“ 1) What’s going on in this piece?

“ 2) What do you see that makes you say that?

“ 3) What more can we find?

Take notes, make the connections, and then organize your thoughts. Then, let the writing begin!



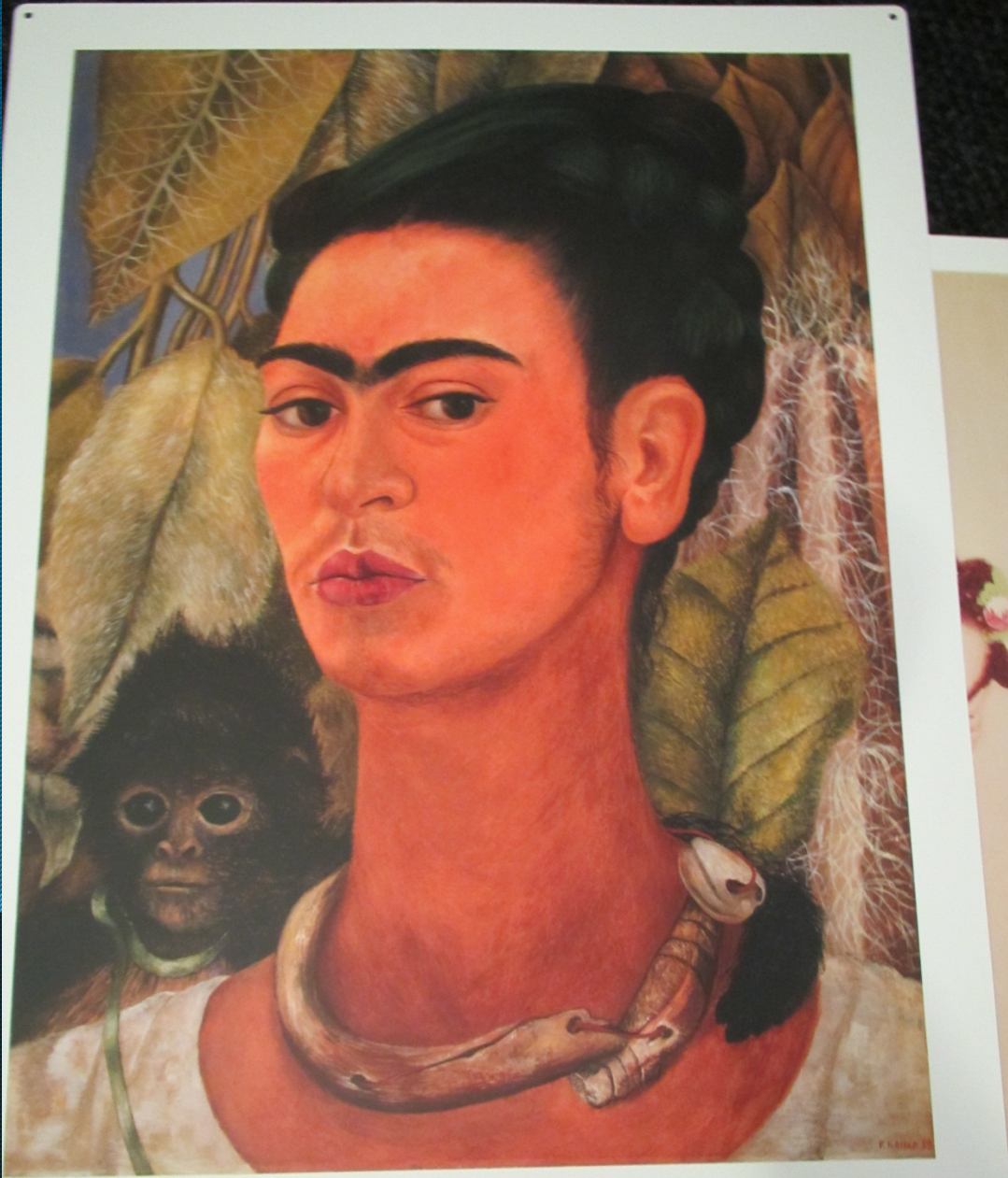
Consider the following images. Ask yourself the three Visual Thinking Strategies questions and consider all the possibilities of each piece.





Reproduction: L'après-midi à Argenteuil  
J.M.W. Turner, Argenteuil on the Seine, 1865  
London, National Gallery, 1865  
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Udbergarten, Lesson 10, Image 1  
Frida Kahlo, Self-Portrait with Monkey, 1938.  
Oil on Masonite, 10 x 12 in.  
© 2015 The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL. Acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL. Bequest of A. Conger Goobler, 1966.





Kindergarten, Lesson 2, Image 1

Diego Rivera. *La Oveja*, 1929.  
Oil on canvas, 21 1/2 x 29 in.  
Courtesy of the San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio.  
© 2000 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Av. Cinco de Mayo No. 2, Col. Centro, Del. Cuauhtémoc 06059, México, D.F.





Kindergarten, Lesson 3, Image 1  
Paul Manship, Group of Bears, 1939.  
Source: 33.102 x 27 x 19 cm.  
Minnesota Museum of American Art, St. Paul. © John Manship.





Kindergarten, Lesson 5, Image 1  
William H. Johnson, *Boys During Trip*, 1939-1942  
Temporary work on paper, 14 1/2 x 17 7/8 in.  
Baltimore: American Folk Museum, gift of the Harmon Foundation.



**The End**