

A Picture to Ponder

What is A Picture to Ponder?

A Picture to Ponder is an image interpretation activity to jump-start students' critical and creative thinking. The activity can be used in many ways including:

- To introduce a new topic
- To reinforce skills
- To spark critical and creative thinking
- To motivate students
- To prepare students to learn
- To assess how much students know



Vincent van Gogh, Farmhouse in Provence, 1888
Image Use: open access

Why do It?

There are many ways to interpret works of art. Looking closely at art enables students to think and express themselves in new ways while appreciating the perspectives of others. They develop an awareness of historical context, conceptual learning, and creative possibilities. Children who interact with art and are urged to look closely and discuss what they see, improve their [critical thinking](#).

How to do It?

Determine what you want students to understand or be able to do as a result of investigating the artwork. Select a digital or hard copy image that has connections to a theme or unit of study such as:



In addition to paintings, other image sources include: photographs, NASA images, political cartoons, advertisements, and picture book illustrations.

Where Can I Get Images?

There are numerous free image resources for use in the classroom. Here are a few to explore.

[Europeana Photography](#) has public domain photographs from numerous countries. The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Rijksmuseum offer thousands of [images](#) of public-domain artworks in their collections. The National Gallery of Art has more than 45,000 [open access](#) digital images. [NASA's](#) entire collection of images and video is available for download.

What questions do I ask?

Next, develop an essential question to stimulate critical/creative thinking and to guide discussion.

Open-ended questions allow for a variety of responses. “What’s going on in this picture?” will get the dialogue started. Students will start generating their own questions too. Create a question board to extend their learning at one of the classroom centers. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers.

Everyone’s ideas are valid as long as they are based in close observation.

Art Talk

What is going on in this picture? What clues tell you this?

If you could step into this scene, what would you see? Hear? Smell?

Who are the main characters in the painting? How can you tell?

What came before/after the moment depicted in the image?

How would you describe the shapes, colors, and lines?

Do portraits tell the story of the individual? Why or why not?

How do you think the art was made?

What would it be like to live in the image?

What does the picture make you think about?

What words describe this image?

What questions would you ask the people in the image?

What question would you ask the artist?

Share The Ponderings

Look Talk Write Create

After examining and discussing the artwork/images, encourage students to share their knowledge to inspire and teach others. Students can:

- Give art “lectures” to their reading buddies
- Plan a schoolwide clue-based “Name That Artist” contest
- Create an image graffiti wall featuring their observations
- Host a portrait caption contest (students provide captions for the portrait)
- Design and write a postcard as if they are in the artwork’s setting
- Make bookmarks (Mondrian shapes, Matisse cutouts, Escher tessellations)
- Design an image-themed reading nook for the media center
- Create a collaborative song, comic book, journal, or story based on the image
- Design a large poster based on the image, and turn it into a jigsaw puzzle
- Select a character in the image, and write a description from that character’s point of view



Happy Ponderings!