PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY
Reading a Picture: Developing Visual Literacy

Objective: To cultivate aesthetic thought by inviting students to talk about what they see. Based on Visual Thinking Strategies developed by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine.

Procedure: In preparation for your trip to the Museum and the careful looking that your students will be asked to do in the Gallery, we suggest that you try the following activity:

- Select a book appropriate to the age level of your students. Before reading the book talk to the students about how the author and illustrator (sometimes one in the same) work to create the words and pictures for a book.
- Explain to the students that when they come to the Museum they will be seeing the original art created by the artist from which the illustrations for the book were made. You can make a copy of a child’s original drawing to provide a concrete example of what that means.
- Choose an illustration from the book for your students to closely examine. If you are able to scan the image, or make a slide of it and then project it, all the better. When selecting an image consider the following issues:
  - Accessibility – Visual: All students should be able to see the details
  - Accessibility – Meaning: Your students will make sense of what they see based on what they already know. Therefore, it is important for your students to recognize what they observe. Your selection should include familiar people, objects, actions, interactions, settings, and/or emotions.
  - Interpretation: Is the image open to interpretation? Is there more than one possible meaning?
  - Engagement: Is it visually engaging? You want something that will draw your students in and sustain their interest.
  - Narrative: Does the image lend itself to the telling of a story?
  - Diversity: If you choose to do this a number of times, be sure to include images that are diverse in culture and time.

Group Project
The goals of this exercise are:

- To focus on the art of the book as well as the text
- To encourage careful observation
- To further develop oral language by encouraging students to share their ideas
- To help them understand that there can be multiple interpretations of the same image
- To develop thinking skills which include evidential reasoning, speculation, and consideration of multiple viewpoints

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Show the image to the group. Instruct them to look carefully for a few seconds without speaking and then ask them, “What do you think is going on in the picture?”

Accept each student’s interpretation but also ask, “What did you see that made you say that?” to help them explain their reasoning and to provide others with a basis for an alternative explanation.

By facilitating an open-ended discussion of the illustration one highlights the idea that meaning is created as a result of the interaction between the viewer and the picture. The viewer both brings meaning to and takes meaning from this interaction. As Kay E. Vandergrift and Rebecca Platzner wrote about visual interpretative analysis of children’s picture book illustrations, “What you hope to create for your students is a guide to some of these many possibilities, not a report of the 'right' interpretation. By guiding others to see what we see, we offer them new possibilities, new ways of looking (ways of knowing) not only at one illustration but at the world around them.”

After a 10 - 15 minute discussion of the illustration you might ask your students to think about what they might expect the story to be about based on what was said. Before the book is read, be sure to give recognition to the fact that based on what was said, the story they are about to hear is just one interpretation of what this picture could depict. Encourage them to see the creative possibilities in all the other ideas they shared together as opposed to thinking some were “right” and others “wrong”.

After reading the story, ask your students if there were any surprises. Older students might want to try their hand at writing a story based on their own interpretative analysis of the illustration.

For more information on the Visual Thinking Strategies visit their web site www.VUE.org.