

VTS: *Visual Thinking Strategies*

Summary of the Visual Thinking Strategies Grades K-5 Curriculum

A Note about Implementation

Full implementation of the VTS in grades K-5 at a school will take three years. During the first year, teachers in Grades K-3 teach the curriculum that is described in the following pages. That same year, Grades 4 and 5 use the curriculum earmarked for Grade 3 so that both students and teachers develop skills that accommodate the more complicated curricula that follow.

In the second year of implementation, the Grades 4 and 5 teachers teach a new and expanded set of lessons to the students who have the first year of experience behind them. This set is described below as Grade 4, and Grade 4 teachers will continue to use this curriculum in the future.

The third year, the Grade 5 teachers have another expanded set of lessons to teach their students who by this time have two years of VTS behind them.

It is likely that the commitment of classroom time allotted will be 10 hours in Grade 3, and increase to 20 in Grade 4, and finally to 25-30 in Grade 5.

VTS Curriculum for Kindergarten

The Kindergarten curriculum has four main goals for students:

- to examine art from different times and places and develop a personal connection to it;
- to identify what they see in these images and to share their associations with others;
- to develop language and thinking skills from identifying objects, people and actions; and
- to develop listening skills.

The curriculum consists of nine lessons, each with two posters. All images have themes related to the lives of children this age. They are full of people, animals, objects and activities that are easily recognizable. In addition, the images tell stories students can decipher with considerable accuracy. The images are drawn from various time periods, styles and cultures and are sequenced to initiate students' development as viewers.

Teachers facilitate the lessons by holding up each poster and asking specific questions of the group. These questions are developmentally-based and student-centered, drawing on skills of children of this age, yet at the same time encouraging them to think in new ways. The opening question for Kindergarten is **"What do you see in this picture?"** This question prompts them to find and identify objects, people and emotions in the image. The second question, **"What else can you find?"** urges them to look closer and conduct a more thorough examination of the work. Near the end of the sequence of lessons **"What do you see in this picture?"** may be replaced with **"What's going on in this picture?"** This new question stimulates deeper thinking about the picture's narrative, thus encouraging students to move beyond the simple listing of things they see. Teachers may also try introducing the question, **"What do you see that makes you say that?"** if certain students seem capable of backing up interpretive statements. This question prompts a new way of thinking for Kindergartners and should be used with discretion so students continue to feel that they are capable.

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- Goals of the Visual Thinking Strategies for Kindergarten
- Introduction
- Getting Ready
- Notes on Keeping Journals
- About the Images
- Guide to Classroom Practice
- Lesson Plans 1-9
- Reproductions of Images

Also included

- 18 Posters (approximately 27 x 21 inches, mounted and protected, with a matte finish)
- 21 x 31 x 3 inch carrying portfolio for posters

VTS Curriculum for Grade One

As in the Kindergarten curriculum, the Grade One curriculum has four primary goals for students:

- to examine art from different times and places and develop a personal connection to it;
- to identify what students see in these images and to share their associations with others;
- to develop language and thinking skills from identifying objects, people and actions; and
- to develop listening skills.

This curriculum consists of ten lessons, each accompanied by two posters. As in Kindergarten, all images are related to the lives of children this age, thus drawing on their memories and imagination. Again, the images tell stories students can decipher and represent various time periods, styles and cultures.

First Grade teachers employ the same methods as Kindergarten teachers, facilitating each lesson by holding up the posters and asking specific questions of the group. Again, they begin with the questions, **“What do you see in this picture?”** and **“What else can you find?”** to allow students to find and identify things that interest them and then continue to probe the image more fully. By the third or fourth lesson the question, **“What do you see in this picture?”** is replaced with **“What’s going on in this picture?”**, encouraging the students to find stories rather than simply list people, objects, actions and emotions. Teachers also introduce the question, **“What do you see that makes you say that?”** from time to time as students seem ready to provide visual evidence for their statements.

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- Introduction
- Getting Ready
- Notes on Keeping Journals
- About the Images
- Guide to Classroom Practice
- Lesson Plans 1-10

- Reproductions of Images for Grade One

Also included

- 20 Posters (approximately 27 x 21 inches, mounted and protected, with a matte finish)
- 21 x 31 x 3 inch carrying portfolio for posters

VTS Curriculum for Grade Two

The goals for students in Grade Two expand on those of the previous two years:

- to examine art from different times and places and develop a personal connection to it;
- to begin understanding that many art objects tell stories, and determine possible meanings of these stories through extended looking and sharing of observations and opinions;
- to develop fundamental thinking skills by answering structured questions that encourage problem-solving through observation, brainstorming, and evidence-building; and
- to strengthen communication skills and respect for various points of view through facilitated group discussion.

As with Grade One, the curriculum consists of ten lessons, each with two posters. Once again, the images are full of people, animals, objects and activities that are easily recognizable for this age. However, they are somewhat more complex than the Kindergarten and Grade One images in terms of style or narrative content. They continue to be diverse in cultural representation, style and media.

Again, the teachers' role is to facilitate each lesson by holding up the reproductions and asking open-ended questions of the group. To reacquaint students with the process, the first few lessons use the questions, "**What's going on in this picture?**" and "**What else can you find?**" In this year of the curriculum, the question, "**What do you see that makes you say that?**" is introduced in an early lesson, as most students are developmentally ready by now to routinely defend their interpretive statements.

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- Introduction
- Getting Ready
- Notes on Keeping Journals
- About the Images
- Guide to Classroom Practice
- Lesson Plans 1-10
- Reproductions of Images for Grade Two

Also included

- 20 Posters (approximately 27 x 21 inches, mounted and protected, with a matte finish)
- 21 x 31 x 3 inch carrying portfolio for posters

VTS Curriculum for Grade Three

Building on the foundation of earlier years, Grade Three of the curriculum has multiple goals for the students:

- to continue examining art of different styles and media, and developing a personal connection with it;
- to understand that art objects tell stories, and to determine possible meaning of these stories through extended looking and sharing of observations and opinions;
- to develop fundamental thinking skills by answering structured questions that encourage problem-solving through observation, brainstorming, and evidence-building;
- to strengthen communication skills and respect for various points of view through facilitated group discussion; and
- to extend the discussions into a writing exercise using computers.

The curriculum consists of ten lessons, the first nine of which are accompanied by three slides and the final lesson is an optional museum visit. Themes of the images for this year focus on family and peer interaction, depicting relationships, friendship and also independence. As always, the images represent various time periods, styles, media, and cultures.

Throughout the nine lessons teachers use the three basic, open-ended questions; **“What’s going on in this picture?”**, **“What do you see that makes you say that?”** and **“What else can you find?”** These questions produce discussions that promote rich interpretations of the art, encourage evidential reasoning, and nourish group interaction and cooperative problem-solving. The richness of the discussions is greatly aided by the teachers adept use of paraphrasing and linking, tools that are the focus of teacher training. During the sequence of lessons, teachers are asked to use the strategies in other contexts, for example asking the questions with regard to images in other texts, or discussing reading assignments. They will ask students to complete a short writing assignment about a work of art, ideally using computers connected to the Internet. They will find additional assignments online if they want to see and/or write about more images. Teachers are encouraged to respond to these assignments in ways that assess the specific skills taught by the VTS (extended observations, interpretation, supported observations and speculation) and to begin keeping a portfolio of each student’s writing. The final optional lesson is a visit to a local museum. If this option is taken, students apply what they’ve learned in the classroom to viewing art in a museum, coming to realize what museums offer as a resource and that they are places where students can feel comfortable.

As stated earlier, the Grade 3 curriculum also functions as an introductory curriculum for fourth and fifth grade teachers and students who have not previously used the VTS. As noted below, the art in later years becomes more challenging, and new questions are introduced to subtly encourage deeper and more critical thinking on the part of students. These skills are best fostered in fourth and fifth grade, when both teachers and students have some familiarity with the VTS method.

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- Lesson Plan 10—The Museum Visit
- Guide to Videotaping

- Guide to Museum Visits
- Images for Grade Three

VTS Curriculum for Grade Four

The goals for Grade Four are:

- to be further exposed to art from different times and places, building on the experiences of earlier grades and continuing to build personal relationships to art;
- to probe images for deeper understandings of characters and settings;
- to begin to think about the artist's intentions and decisions as factors in their reasoning;
- to further develop fundamental thinking skills by answering structured questions that encourage problem-solving through observation, brainstorming, and evidence-building;
- to strengthen communication skills and respect for various points of view through facilitated group discussion;
- to continue to use the computer and internet for writing and other exercises; and
- to begin small group work, more loosely supervised by the teacher.

The Grade Four curriculum also consists of ten lessons, nine of them focusing on three slides to be discussed in a classroom. The final lesson is a museum visit—which at this point is strongly encouraged. The images again adhere to themes related to students' environment and lives, but address more problematic issues and are more ambiguous in meaning, thus encouraging deeper looking. Themes include the formation of one's identity, and issues of communication in peer or familial relationships. Images continue to be culturally and stylistically diverse. Many of the images are chosen to fit the specifics of the probing questions listed below.

In addition to the standard questions, additional questions are introduced, including, **"What more can you say about this person?"**, **"What more can you say about where this is happening?"**, **"Where was the artist standing in order to make this picture?"**, **"What objects seem far from us? closer to us? in between?"** These questions stimulate deeper probing of images, encouraging students to learn additional strategies for examining works of art and beginning to think about an artist's intentions. Students will complete several writing assignments that they obtain by computer connected to the

Internet, communicating with their teacher by email if possible. The last lesson of the curriculum is a museum visit.

Teachers are regularly encouraged to apply the VTS method in other classes, in particular with regard to current reading assignments. Their facilitation skills become very important for insuring that student discussions are thorough and rigorous, that students' language skills are addressed, and that students see the pathways of their collaborative thinking/problem solving. Teachers learn more about how to assess students' thinking skills, especially related to the writing assignments.

The Grade 4 curriculum functions as a secondary introduction for fifth grade teachers and students with one year of experience using the VTS. The art in the fifth grade curriculum is quite challenging, and several new questions are introduced. The implementation for a grade 3-5 curriculum, then, works as follows:

- Year 1: Grades 3-5 all use the Grade 3 curriculum;
- Year 2: Grade 3 continues with Grade 3 curriculum; Grades 4 and 5 use Grade 4 curriculum;
- Year 3: Grade 3 continues with Grade 3 curriculum; Grade 4 continues with Grade 4 curriculum; Grade 5 uses Grade 5 curriculum.

At this point, the curriculum is established, and continues with very little outside involvement.

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- Images for Grade Four

VTS Curriculum for Grade Five

The final year of the curriculum incorporates all goals of earlier years, with an emphasis on group discussion for problem-solving, oral communication skills, writing skills and use of technology. In addition, students will begin:

- to advance the skills learned throughout the past years and further gain confidence in their ability to examine and interpret diverse works of art;
- to probe images for evidence of their historical period;
- to think further about motivations and choices made by artists;
- to learn additional strategies for probing art, including comparison;
- to continue writing assignments and introduce small group work to reduce their dependence on others for ideas and information, as well as to assist with transfer of the VTS experience to other subjects; and
- to seek information to amplify what they know.

There are again ten lessons over the course of the year; nine in the classroom and one museum visit. More diverse and complex works of art are included because students now have greater confidence in their ability to examine and to interpret them. They expand on the themes of earlier curricula by relating them to issues less concrete than in previous years, and to situations and predicaments that one encounters in the larger world. Many of the images are chosen to fit the specifics of the probing questions listed below. A selection of self-portraits will be included, as well as other examples of these artists' work.

Teachers ask the basic questions and the additional probing questions introduced earlier, so that students can practice all skills and methods learned previously. Teachers also add other questions: **“What more can you say about when this is happening?”** asks students to probe for the complex matter of time: era; season; time of day or moment in an action. The questions, **“What do you think interested the artist in this subject?”** and **“What would you like to ask the artist if she or he were here?”** ask students to further the process begun in Grade 4, considering the artist's intentions in creating a work of art. Another set of questions asks students to make comparisons between groups of pictures. Students choose an artist who interests them, examine several works by that artist, and develop a series of questions they might pose to that artist. The VTS website would contain information for students to find in answer to their questions, developing the content based on what we have heard from students in the past, when they conducted research on the same artists. The website user interface would be designed to address the interests and abilities of students. Once again, the final lesson is a museum visit, where

ideally museum personnel help students find additional information related to their questions. Writing is a part of most lessons, using the computer to complete assignments.

Teachers work on their capacities to paraphrase and link, learning to use these as tools for helping them to assess student learning. The major aspect of their professional development will address understanding and assessing changes in the thinking and verbal abilities of their students.

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