

Resources for Families

What is VTS?

Your school has been using a research-based learning process called Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). Through facilitated discussions of visual images, the VTS curriculum supports critical thinking, visual literacy, communication and collaboration skills. It also happens to be very fun and often surprising. And good news—in this time of online and at-home learning—it can easily be adapted to spark engaging discussions at home. Here are some resources & tips so you can try this at home one-on-one with your child, or with your whole family.

How it works

In the classroom a VTS lesson begins with a work of art projected at the front of the room and invites students to look silently for a few moments. The teacher then asks three open-ended questions (see the questions below in English and Spanish) and responds by paraphrasing their responses while pointing to the parts of the picture they are noticing. At home, you can invite your child(ren) to look at a picture (on a screen, in a book, perhaps even hanging on your wall) and use the same 3 simple VTS questions, pointing and listening intently to their responses.

Below you will find instructions & tips for supporting a VTS discussion and also resources for finding great images. Enjoy!

Resources included in this guide

1. VTS Procedure (provided in English and Spanish)
2. Tips & FAQs
3. Finding Pictures to Discuss
4. VTS & Writing

Procedure in English:

First, take a silent moment to look at the image.

The 3 VTS Questions

1. Begin with the question: **What's going on in this picture?**
2. Ask: **What do you see that makes you say...?** whenever you hear a comment that is inferring meaning beyond what can simply be described, to encourage them to find details to support their interpretation.
3. Ask **What more can you find?** frequently to keep them searching and making more observations.

Responding to Comments

Listen carefully, making sure that you hear all of what they say and that you understand it accurately.

Point precisely to what they observe in the image (or invite them to as they speak). Point as you listen to the comments, and also as you paraphrase/restate the comments.

Paraphrase each comment without praising or correcting—making sure you heard and understand the comment, perhaps supplying some new vocabulary but never changing the idea.

This active & supportive listening in combination with the 3 VTS questions and pointing are very powerful ways to engage your child when you look at pictures in books, in the media, and with art images.

VTS en Español:

Tomen tiempo para examinar este imagen./Tomen un minuto para ver esto.

Después de que hayan observado la imagen, pregúntales: **¿Qué está pasando en este imagen?/¿Que esta pasando aqui?**

Siempre que los estudiantes hagan un comentario que implica una interpretación (un comentario que vaya más allá de la identificación o de una descripción literal), primero responde parafraseando lo que se ha dicho, luego pregunta: **¿Que estas viendo que te hace decir/pensar que...?/¿Que miraste que te hizo decir/pensar...?**

Para que los estudiantes sigan involucrados en observar más detalles, pregúntales frecuentemente: **¿Que mas podemos encontrar/hallar?/¿Que mas podemos ver?**

Respondiendo a los comentarios

Escucha atentamente a los estudiantes, asegurándote de que oyes y entiendes exactamente todo lo que ellos te digan.

Señala lo que ellos mencionan en la diapositiva. Se preciso, aun cuando se trate de un comentario ya repetido. Utiliza gestos y expresión corporal para alentar la participación de la clase.

Parafrasea cada comentario. Cambia las palabras, pero no cambies el significado de lo que dicen. Cuando parafrasees, usa correctamente la gramática y un vocabulario amplio para ayudar a los estudiantes a enriquecer su vocabulario.

Aceptar cada comentario de un modo imparcial. Recuerda que este proceso no está dirigido a conseguir respuestas correctas sino a establecer unas pautas útiles para pensar. Los estudiantes empezarán a aprender cómo hacer observaciones detalladas, clasificando y aplicando lo que ya saben. Una articulación coherente del pensamiento conduce al desarrollo, incluso cuando se cometan errores.

Asociar las respuestas que estén relacionadas entre sí y también intentar hacerlo cuando parezca que hay diferencias de opinión. Así se mostrará de qué modo evolucionan los pensamientos de los alumnos y como algunas observaciones e ideas estimulan a los demás, de la misma manera que las opiniones van cambiando al irse agregando información y construyendo una visión más rica y compleja.

2. Tips & FAQs

Paraphrasing:

In a classroom VTS lesson the teacher *paraphrases* or restates what each student says about the picture. They do so without praising or correcting—making sure they understand the idea, maybe supplying some new vocabulary but never changing the student's idea. This validates the contribution of each student, and also makes certain everyone else in the classroom hears and considers the idea. *This may not feel necessary when you are sitting one-on-one with your child, but it is a form of active listening and a way of checking and showing you understand their ideas. Try it and see how it feels (for your child, and for you).

For example:



Curandera (Faith Healer),
Artist: Carmen Lomas Garza, 1989

Student: Someone is sick and their grandmother is taking care of them.

Teacher: Ok, so you are looking at these 2 people and thinking one may not be feeling well, and the other is caring for them, perhaps their grandmother. What do you see that makes you say this person is sick? (pointing to the one in bed)

Student: They are in bed but it's day time. And there's cough syrup on the table.

Teacher: So because the person is in bed in the middle of the day, and you noticed what could be some medicine here, you are thinking the person could be sick. What more can you find?

You could also ask:

What do you see that makes you say ...

this person is a grandmother?

this person is taking care of this one?

that it is daytime?

How can I hear what a classroom VTS discussion sounds like?

Listen to this VTS discussion with 1st grade students to get a feel for the flow of the questions and paraphrasing [here](#).

Asking "What do you see that makes you say ..."

This VTS question asks viewers to look for details in the image to support their interpretations and conclusions. In the example above, there were many points that could be probed for details to explain their thinking. You don't need to ask this question after comments that are more descriptive -- i.e. "I see a blue bedspread." Listen for comments that are open to interpretation, or that are inferring feelings, actions, relationships. (*Backing up claims with evidence is a cornerstone of critical thinking and something students are asked to do in every subject area).

Why do we ask you to accept each comment without praise or judgement?

The VTS process emphasizes a useful pattern of thinking, not right answers. Students are learning to make detailed observations, sorting out and applying what they know. Articulating their thoughts leads to growth even when they make mistakes.

The focus of a VTS discussion is to provide an open and accepting environment that supports your child's independent thinking and ability to puzzle through and find meaning in these pictures. And while it might surprise you, the focus is not on teaching the background information about the who, what, where, and why of the picture (*though kids often figure much of this out on their own*). The research upon which VTS is based demonstrates that the foundation of making sense of images (and visual literacy) at first involves making observations, personal connections and seeking stories. Interest in, and the usefulness of background/historical information, comes into play as students become more experienced viewers.

Why discuss art?

Art lends itself to open-ended exploring and supports multiple interpretations—you and your child may have very different ideas about what's happening in an image, and that's the fun!

3. Where can we find pictures to discuss?

In school our VTS discussions focus on images that have been selected for our particular grade level. When considering what to discuss with your child, find images that have an implicit story or narrative, some ambiguity or mystery, and subject matter that would be of interest to them. Below are some interesting places to find thought-provoking images.

1. Look for a new art image posted daily on VTShome.org
2. In collaboration with [The New York Times Learning Network](https://www.nytimes.com/learning/series/what-s-going-on-in-this-picture) (free, no subscription required) the [What's Going On in This Picture?](#) feature asks students to look closely at an image from *The Times*, stripped of its caption, and join a conversation about what you see with students across the U.S. [Visual Thinking Strategies](#) provides live moderation from 9 a.m. – 2 p.m. EST every Monday.
3. Check out this slideshow of [40 Favorite What's Going On In This Picture? Images](#)
4. Picture books (look at and discuss the pictures before reading the words)
5. Pictures in your home—like posters, family photos, or other images that decorate your home.
6. Online museum collections. [The Ultimate Guide to Virtual Museum Resources, E-Learning, and Online Collections](#)

4. VTS and Writing

While VTS discussions are opportunities to engage in oral language, you could also ask your child to write about an image. At this point in the school year they should be familiar with the three VTS questions, but write them as prompts at the top of the paper.

- *What's going on in this picture?*
- *What do you see that makes you say that?*
- *What more can you find?*

Encourage them to write full paragraphs, more like a free write, rather than answering each question individually. If they seem to get stuck, you can encourage them to continue writing by asking, "What more can you find?" This is more like a reflective journal entry rather than a formal paper.

Self-reflection (could be done orally or in writing)

Adapted from a presentation by Heidi Arbogast and Marion Schlicker Bageant and the essay, "The Power of VTS Writing Lab Changed Me, Then My School District"

www.vtshome.org/site-specific/

- One thing I did well was _____ (provide evidence)
- One thing I want to improve upon is _____ (provide evidence)
- What could you change in your writing to make it flow better?
- List some strong words from your writing
- Set a writing goal for next time

Visit the VTS website, www.vtshome.org, to learn more!