

“READING” PORTRAITURE GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

Portrait “reading” encourages the visual analysis of a piece of art as if it were a historical document.

Here at the National Portrait Gallery, we use the visual clues found in our objects (painting, photography, drawing, and sculpture) to learn about the individuals featured in the artwork. Want to learn about John Brown? Your first inclination might be to have your students read something about Brown, and this is certainly a valid way to gain information. But we are asking that you turn that notion on its side and have students “read” a portrait prior to reading an essay or biography. This guide will encourage you and your students to look at the visual image first. Although you will want to supplement the visual reading with some actual reading, we are confident that this new technique of “learning to look” will produce a richer—and possibly more memorable—examination of the individual.

Following are techniques (“Learning to Look” Strategies) for you to use with your students when looking at portraiture. All conversations should lead to looking back at the object and reflecting on what students’ observations might reveal about the sitter’s life and the era in which that person lived.

This simple exercise revolves around asking students, “What do you see?” Inside, you will find some probing questions to familiarize students with the concept of “reading” portraits and some follow-up questions to ask after students have exhausted the looking exercise.

Before asking the questions, define “portrait,” “sitter,” and “symbol” with your students.

Portrait: A likeness or image of a person that is created by an artist.

Sitter: The person or people who are in a portrait.

Symbol: Something representing something else by association; objects, characters, or other concrete representations of an abstract idea, concept, or event.

Please note: as the facilitator of this activity, you will want to be well-versed with the sitter’s identity and accomplishments, as well as what you want your students to take away from the exercise.



Smithsonian
*Donald W. Reynolds Center for
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“LEARNING TO LOOK” STRATEGIES

THIRTY-SECOND LOOK

- Have students look at the portrait for thirty seconds. Then have them turn away from the image. Conduct a conversation with students about what they saw.
- Be sure to ask probing and open-ended questions.

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

- Ask each person in the class to name something they see in the portrait, saying, “I see a _____. What do you see?” Each person must name the previous observations and add a new one: “I see a _____ and a _____. What do you see?”
- Have each student make a hypothesis about the use and meaning of objects pictured in a portrait.

THE OBJECT RACE

- Prepare a list of objects found in the portrait for your students to find.
- Tell the students that their objective is to be the first to find all the objects listed on their object card.

PUZZLES

- Make a photocopy of a portrait.
- Cut the copy into 8–10 pieces, making sure each piece contains a significant symbol. Give each student/pair of students a piece of the puzzle.
- Have students discuss what is in their piece, then tell them to complete the puzzle.

JUMPING INTO A PORTRAIT (PRE-K TO THIRD GRADE)

- Have young people look at a portrait that contains a scene. Ask them where they would like to be in that portrait. Direct young people to use their imagination and “jump” into the portrait.
- Ask questions related to the five senses: sight, touch, smell, taste, hearing.

WHAT AM I THINKING?

- Have your students consider what the sitter might be thinking as he or she is sitting for the portrait.
- Ask them what the sitter might be getting ready to say.

WHAT WOULD YOU ASK THE SITTING/ARTIST?

- Ask students, “If you could ask the artist or sitter a question about the portrait, what would it be?”
- Have students imagine a story between the sitter and the artist.

WHAT DO YOU WONDER?

- Have students consider the question, “What do you wonder about this portrait?”
- After a student has asked a question, ask the other students to respond with their opinion.

STRIKE A POSE

- Have students pose like the sitter in the portrait.
- Ask students to consider what it feels like to pose like this sitter, to wear those clothes, and be in the setting of the portrait.
- Have students write a first-person letter to a friend describing their portrait experience.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

- Choose two portraits of the same individual and have students compare and contrast them.
- Discuss what is similar and what is different. For what purpose were each of the portraits created?
- If looking at portraits from two distinct periods in a person’s life, discuss how the likeness of the individual has changed and what occurred between the years of the portraits.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE LOOKING AT A PORTRAIT

- What do you see?
- What is the sitter doing in the portrait?
- Who is the sitter? Why is this sitter important? What is the significance of this person in American history? (These questions may need to be answered after students have read the label or as follow-up questions after you have supplied additional information.)
- What words do you think best describe how the sitter looks in the portrait? (i.e., courageous, triumphant, powerful, proud, determined, energetic, stern, happy, presidential, handsome, tall, content, formal, calm, uncomfortable, dignified, old, powerful, heroic)
- What symbols are used to give us clues about the life of the sitter?
- List adjectives that describe both the sitter and his or her emotions.
- What is the location of the sitter in the portrait? Is the location or background real or imagined? What clues help us to determine that?
- How does color set the tone and mood of the portrait?
- Describe the sitter's clothing. How does it reflect this sitter's place in society?
- What is the medium of this portrait?

AFTER YOU HAVE EXHAUSTED "STRAIGHT ON" LOOKING QUESTIONS, CONSIDER THESE FOR FOLLOW-UP, TO EXPAND THE "READING" EXERCISE.

- What are the similarities and differences between a portrait and a written biography?
- Name three things you might infer about the sitter from this portrait.
- Who is the artist?
- What personal qualities do you attribute to the sitter based on the portrait?
- Name three things you think the portraitist wanted to say about the sitter.
- Where was the portrait created? What is the significance of that?
- When was the portrait done? How old was the sitter at the time of the portrait?
- For what occasion was this portrait done?
- What purposes did the portrait serve?
- Is it a life portrait (the sitter sat for the artist) or a memory portrait (created after the death of the sitter)? What is the significance of that?
- What does the portrait say about American life during this era?
- What was going on in history during the creation of this portrait?
- What questions does the portrait raise for you?

"READING" PORTRAITURE AT A GLANCE

The two key elements to reading portraits are looking and analyzing.

LOOKING

Sitter

Describe the sitter's pose.

Symbols

What objects are seen in the portrait?

Adjectives

Use adjectives to describe the sitter.

Clothing

What clothing is the sitter wearing?

Medium

What medium was used to create the portrait?

Setting

What is the setting of the portrait?

Time Period

In what period of history does the portrait appear to be set?



ANALYZING

Sitter

Who is the sitter? Why is this sitter significant to American history?

Symbols

What might the objects tell us about the sitter?

Attributes

What personal qualities might we attribute to the sitter based on the portrait?

Clothing

What might the sitter's clothing tell us about the sitter's profession, personality, social status, or place in history?

Artist

Who is the artist? Why is the artist significant?

Setting

What might the portrait's setting tell us about the sitter?

Time Period

When was the portrait created? What was going on in history when the portrait was created?

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