



# “READING” PORTRAITURE

## Guide for Educators

The National Portrait Gallery tells the story of America by portraying the people who shape the nation’s history, development, and culture. These Americans help us understand who we are and remind us of what we can aspire to be.

At the museum we have developed this guide so that educators can use portraits as a springboard for a conversation. Portraits present insights into history and biography, prompt writing in the classroom, inspire students to create self-portraits, and even offer great ties to science and mathematics. In this guide, you will discover how to teach students to spot visual clues in artworks and then analyze them, similar to dissecting a historical document. Teaching students to use close reading skills with portraiture will produce a rich and memorable investigation of both the sitter and the artist.

The “Learning to Look” strategies in this guide offer unique ways to engage in close looking with your students. The Elements of Portrayal (found on the back page) provide more guiding questions to help you and your students learn how to read portraiture.

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Before using the strategies contained in this guide with your students, ask them to define the terms “portrait,” “sitter/subject,” and “symbol.”

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

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

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

As the facilitator of reading portraits, you will:

- Want to be well-versed with the sitter’s identity and accomplishments, as well as the contextual information about the portrait
- Need to consider what you want your students to take away from the exercise.
- Lead all conversations to looking back at the portrait and reflecting on what students’ observations might reveal about the sitter’s life, era, and contribution to America, as well as the artist’s style and goals for the portrait.

# “Learning to Look” Strategies

## Thirty-second Look

- Have students look at a portrait for thirty seconds. Then have them turn away from the image. Conduct a conversation with students, asking only visual questions, such as, “Describe the setting” and “What objects can be seen in the portrait?”
- When the students turn back to the image, ask analytical questions, considering why the visual elements are included in the portrait.



## Puzzle

- This activity works best with complex portraits.
- 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, without showing the others their piece of the puzzle. Discuss what they know and what they don't know based on their verbal descriptions.
- Complete the puzzle. View and analyze the entire portrait, either in the museum or online.



## Jumping into a Portrait

- Choose a portrait that contains a rich setting. Have students study the image, then ask them to use their imagination and “jump” into the portrait. Tell them they can be any size they would like to be, and they have to choose a certain spot. Where would they like to land, and why?
- Ask questions related to their five senses: sight, touch, smell, taste, hearing (for example, What do you hear in this spot? What do you smell? If you could touch something around you, what do you think it would feel like?).



## Strike a Pose

- Have students pose like the sitter in the portrait.
- Ask students to consider how it feels to pose like this sitter, wear those clothes, and be in the setting of the portrait.
- If we could un-pause the portrait, what might the subject do or say? How can you tell?
- 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.
- 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 the portraits were made.



# “Learning to Look” Strategies

## Seven Ways to Look at a Portrait (you will need paper and a pencil)

Adapted from [artmuseumteaching.com](http://artmuseumteaching.com)

1. Look closely at this portrait for one minute. Discuss your initial observations with a partner. Focus on a small part of the portrait, using the paper as a telescope. What new things did you notice? Share with your partner.
2. Write down one question you have about this portrait.
3. On the back of your paper, draw this portrait. You only have one minute. Use the whole page!
4. Finish your drawing, using WORDS instead of lines. Wherever you would draw a line, write descriptive words, questions, or whatever comes to mind.
5. Once you are finished, turn to a classmate and read EXACTLY what you wrote.
6. Once finished, the teacher will read the museum label. How does this information affect the way you view this portrait? What new questions do you have?
7. Come together for a final class discussion.



## Think-Puzzle-Explore

Ask your students:

- What do you think you know about this portrait?
- What puzzles you about this portrait?
- What does this portrait make you want to explore?

## See-Think-Wonder

Ask your students:

- What do you see?
- What do you think about what you see?
- What do you wonder about this portrait?

## Claim-Support-Question

Ask your students to:

- Make a claim about the artwork.
- Identify support for the claim.
- Ask a question related to the claim.

Visit [pzartfulthinking.org](http://pzartfulthinking.org) for more Artful Thinking Routines.

## Unveiling Stories

1. What is the visible story?
2. What is the human story?
3. What is the world story?
4. What is the new story?
5. What is the untold story?

For more information on Global Thinking Routines, please visit [goglobal.fiu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2014/05/4005\\_ReadingD\\_GlobalThinkingRoutines.pdf](http://goglobal.fiu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2014/05/4005_ReadingD_GlobalThinkingRoutines.pdf).

# The Elements of Portrayal

The Elements of Portrayal provide the foundation by which we engage with works of art. Initiate the conversation by having students identify the various elements of portrayal in a portrait, using the questions below. How do we bring these elements together to tell the story of a sitter?

**Facial expression:** Use adjectives to describe the sitter's facial expression. What emotion(s) does this expression convey?

**Pose:** Describe the sitter's pose. What is the artist trying to say about the sitter?

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

**Hairstyle:** Describe the sitter's hairstyle. Why would hairstyle be an important element of a portrait?

**Setting:** What is the setting of the portrait? What might the setting tell us about the sitter? Consider if the setting is real or imagined.

**Objects:** What objects are in the portrait? Objects function as symbols. What might they be telling us about the sitter?

**Color:** What is color conveying in this image? How does color set the tone and mood of the portrait?

**Medium:** What medium was used to create the portrait? Why is medium important as we read portraiture?

**Scale:** What effect does the size of this portrait have on the way we view the sitter?

**Artistic style:** How does this artist's particular style tell us something about the sitter?

**Other questions to consider:**

- Why was the portrait created? What purpose did it serve?
- What does the portrait say about American life at the time it was created?



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