

VISUAL THINKING STRATEGIES

Seeing Through Art

A Museum Practitioner's Perspective on VTS

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Followed by: Tinesha McNeill— VTS from a Teacher's Perspective



WHO IS SABRIYAH?

Educator (Former Classroom Teacher)

Museum Practitioner

Special Education Advocate

Lifelong Learner

Racial Inequity Disruptor

Arts & Culture Lover

Out of School Time Enthusiast

Parent



What Is VTS?

A learner-centered method for looking closely and thinking out loud

Developed by Philip Yenawine & Dr. Abigail Housen, grounded in research on how viewers build meaning from images.

The facilitator's job: paraphrase what's said, point to what's described, and link related ideas — without judging or supplying answers.



1

What's going on in
this picture?

2

What do you see
that makes you say
that?

3

What more can we
find?

Why Museums Are Ideal Ground for VTS

1

Original, unfamiliar works

No captions to read first — visitors build meaning from direct observation, not wall text.

2

A truly level playing field

No art history background required. Every visitor already knows how to look and describe.

3

Built-in variety

Rotating exhibits give practitioners fresh, developmentally appropriate images for every group.

4

Practice for life beyond art

Observation, evidence-based reasoning, and respectful listening transfer far past the gallery.



Museums as Third Spaces

Beyond school and work — and how VTS makes that space real

FIRST PLACE

Home

Where we belong by default



SECOND PLACE

School & Work

Structured, obligation-driven



THIRD PLACE

Museums & Community

Chosen, informal, welcoming to all

How VTS Makes the Third Space Real



No experts, no hierarchy

Every visitor's observation counts equally — a retiree, a toddler, and a teacher all sit at the same table.



Conversation over instruction

VTS turns a quiet gallery walk into shared dialogue — the social exchange a true third space depends on.



Come as you are

No right answer to prepare for and nothing to study beforehand — anyone can walk in and belong immediately.



Practice for community life

Looking, listening, and building on someone else's idea are civic skills that extend far past the museum.

AT THE MUSEUM

Banneker-Douglass-Tubman Museum

Annapolis, Maryland

On view

Feb 7, 2026 – Jan 16, 2027

Curated by

Martina Dodd, Curator of Collections & Exhibitions

Artists featured

17 Maryland-based & internationally recognized Black women artists



Our Current Exhibit

She Speaks: Black Women Artists and the Power of Historical Memory

Examining the 250-year history of the United States through a Black feminist lens — a constellation of deeply personal, politically charged works that bear witness to the past and conjure Afrofuturist visions of what's next.

A range of media, all in one gallery

Painting

Print

Photography

Textile

Installation

Time-based media

Archival materials

Family heirlooms

Featured artists include Elizabeth Catlett, Faith Ringgold, Martha Jackson Jarvis, and Alisha B. Wormsley, among others.

Why “She Speaks” Works So Well for VTS

This exhibit gives practitioners exactly what a strong VTS session needs

1

Many entry points

Painting to textile to installation — there's a format that clicks for every visitor and every age.

2

Rich, layered detail

Personal and political works reward the follow-up question: “What more can we find?”

3

Family & memory threads

Archival materials and heirlooms invite visitors to connect the art to their own family stories.

4

Many voices, no single answer

17 artists, 17 perspectives — there's no “correct” reading to guess, which is exactly the VTS spirit.

VTS in Practice at BDTM

Adapting the same three questions to three different visitors

Classroom Field Trips

- Prime with one question before entering the gallery
- Small groups pause at 3–4 works, 10 min each
- Tie discussion to curriculum: evidence, SEL, ELA

Home School Groups

- Flexible pacing — let curiosity set the clock
- One artwork, mixed ages: everyone answers at their level
- Send a follow-up question home to extend the visit

Families with Young Children

- Shorten to 2–3 works and simplify the language
- “I notice...” instead of formal VTS phrasing
- Follow the child's lead — their answer is never wrong

VTs With My Son

A visit to the Telfair Museum of Art with my 3-year-old



Why I'm sharing this?

- Even at 3, he could describe what he saw and point to evidence
- “What more can we find?” turned a quick glance into real looking
- Proof that VTS is not just a K-12 strategy and can be used before and after formal schooling begins and/or ends

Takeaways for Museum Practitioners

1

Every visitor is a valid interpreter

Your job is to open the discussion, not to grade it.

2

Galleries are living classrooms

Rotating exhibits like She Speaks keep VTS material fresh and relevant.

3

Small language shifts, big results

“What do you see that makes you say that?” does more work than any lecture.

4

Educators are partners, not audiences

The richest VTS programs are co-designed with the teachers who bring students back.

Thank You

Up next

Tinesha McNeill

VTs from a Teacher's Perspective



Who am I?

Tinesha J. McNeill

Signature Program Coordinator,
Annapolis High School
Annapolis, MD



- 28-year educator, instructional coach, curriculum and assessment writer and educational leader.
- Taught Social Studies, Language Arts, Honors African American Studies, AP African American Studies, Sociology and Global Community Citizenship; grades 2 through College.
- Educational Consultant and Student Success Advocate/Implementation Coach.
- Champion of scholarship on all levels, by any means.
- Cat Mom and Arts Enthusiast!

VTS FROM A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Teaching Through the Eyes of Students

- **Students notice more than we think.**
- **Quiet students often have the richest observations.**
- **Discussion becomes meaningful when students support ideas with evidence.**
- **Learning becomes shared rather than delivered.**



Why VTS is Useful in School Instruction

The questions support multiple learning goals that strengthens scholarship.

- **Engages student voice.**
- **Evokes critical thinking.**
- **Promotes Academic Language through teacher facilitated engagement.**
- **Boosts confidence in students' artistic and critical thinking capacities.**



What VTS *Looks* Like in a Classroom



Instruction shifts from teacher-directed to student-centered.

- ❑ **Before instruction: wait for answers, building wait time.**
- ❑ **During instruction: student/teacher collaborate to build meaning together.**
- ❑ **After: celebrating the formation of thought; creating confident thinkers**
- ❑ **End result- continued discourse and a growing respect in a learning environment.**

VTS Across Content Areas

"It's not just for art class"



VISUAL THINKING STRATEGIES (VTS)

A Strategy for Every Classroom

VTS is not about art.

It is about helping students observe closely, think critically, communicate effectively, and support ideas with evidence.

See.
Think.
Wonder.
Together.

THREE
CORE
QUESTIONS



1. What's
going on here?



2. What do you
see that makes
you say that?



3. What more
can we find?

These questions help students develop observation, reasoning, discussion, and evidence-based thinking **across disciplines**.



ENGLISH
LANGUAGE ARTS

1 Character Analysis



Show an illustration from a text. Infer character traits and support ideas with visual evidence.

2 Poetry Study



Analyze a photograph before reading a poem. Discuss mood, theme, and symbolism.

3 Narrative Writing



Examine a historical image. Use details to craft setting, conflict, and plot.



SCIENCE

1 Ecosystem Observation



Study an image of a wetland or rainforest. Identify relationships between organisms.

2 Scientific Phenomena



Analyze photos of weather events or erosion. Generate hypotheses and discuss observable evidence.

3 Medical Imaging



Observe X-rays, ultrasounds, or microscope slides. Practice noticing details before drawing conclusions.



MATHEMATICS

1 Data Analysis



Examine graphs and infographics. Identify patterns and trends and explain reasoning.

2 Geometry in the Real World



Study architecture or bridge designs. Identify shapes, angles, and symmetry.

3 Problem Solving



Analyze visual math tasks. Compare multiple solution strategies and justify thinking with evidence.



SOCIAL STUDIES

1 Historical Photographs



Investigate primary sources. Infer historical context and support claims with evidence.

2 Political Cartoons



Analyze symbols and messages. Consider multiple perspectives.

3 Maps & Migration Patterns



Observe geographic data. Identify trends and patterns before direct instruction.



CAREER &
TECHNICAL
EDUCATION (CTE)

1 Civil Engineering



Examine bridge or roadway designs. Identify challenges and solutions.

2 Entrepreneurship



Analyze advertisements and branding. Determine target audience and marketing strategies.

3 Healthcare



Observe healthcare settings or equipment. Infer purpose and function using evidence.

WHY
VTS
WORKS



Builds
critical
thinking



Strengthens
student
discourse



Develops
evidence-
based
reasoning



Encourages
multiple
perspectives



Amplifies
student
voice



Increases
engagement
across content
areas



Students learn to look closely, listen deeply, support their reasoning with evidence, and build understanding together.



AACPS SIGNATURE PROGRAM CONNECTION

VTS supports the Portrait of a Graduate by fostering communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and curiosity while creating equitable opportunities for every student to contribute to learning.

SEE. THINK. WONDER.
Grow. TOGETHER.

How VTS Supports Culturally Responsive Teaching

Creating spaces where every voice matters.



Identity

Students connect learning to lived experiences.

- Students draw on their backgrounds, cultures, and experiences.
- Learning becomes relevant and personal.
- Students see themselves in the learning.



Voice

Multiple perspectives are welcomed.

- Students share observations and interpretations.
- All viewpoints are explored with evidence.
- Dialogue fosters respect for diverse perspectives.



Belonging

Every learner contributes.

- Inquiry over correctness creates access for all.
- Every student's contribution matters.
- Students build confidence in their participation.



Community

Discussion strengthens relationships.

- Listening and building on ideas builds trust.
- Empathy grows through understanding others.
- Stronger classroom communities lead to deeper learning.

“ The goal is not consensus.
The goal is understanding. ”

VTS creates opportunities for students to:



See themselves reflected in the learning process



Connect academic content to personal experiences



Develop confidence in expressing ideas



Learn to appreciate differing perspectives



Build meaningful relationships through dialogue



When students learn to look closely, listen carefully, and think deeply, they become **lifelong learners**.

Experience VTS

A Teacher's Guide to Facilitating Meaningful Discussion

*Facilitating thinking through
observation, evidence and dialogue*

1

What's going on in this picture?

Invite students to share
initial observations and
interpretations.

2

What do you see that makes you say that?

Encourage evidence-
based reasoning and
support for ideas.

3

What more can we find?

Promote deeper
observation and
continued inquiry.



Experience VTS

A Teacher's Guide to Facilitating Meaningful Discussion

Facilitating thinking through observation, evidence and dialogue

With a partner, practice VTS by completing a capture sheet. Find two (2) images in the museum to discuss and think through. For each image respond to the three (3) prompts given.



**LOOK
THINK
SHARE**

Your voice matters.

Every perspective strengthens our learning community.

Observe first. Interpret second.

1

What's going on in this picture?

Invite students to share initial observations and interpretations.

2

What do you see that makes you say that?

Encourage evidence-based reasoning and support for ideas.

3

What more can we find?

Promote deeper observation and continued inquiry.

FACILITATOR REMINDERS

PARAPHRASE

Restate student thinking neutrally.

POINT

Direct attention to visual evidence.

CONNECT

Link related ideas and perspectives.

STAY NEUTRAL

Avoid evaluating responses as right or wrong.

“ The goal is not to teach students what to think. The goal is to help students learn how to think. ”

Let's Reflect on Your Findings:

If the two images could have a conversation, what might they say to each other about the theme you identified?

What is one idea you heard from your partner that deepened your understanding of the images?

VTS Reminders:

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

"The goal is not consensus. The goal is understanding."



Thank You

Please scan the QR code to complete our exit survey. Thank you for attending.

