

Inquiry on Tours

Well-worded questions on a tour invite visitors to discover works of art, analyze artists' intentions, examine their own responses and attitudes, and share with others.

The major role of a guide is that of a facilitator, and facilitating is a dynamic process. By asking questions and leading discussions, tour participants generate thoughtful discussion and construct meaning on their own. The use of inquiry creates an atmosphere of trust by demonstrating that you are genuinely interested in and open to the thoughts and opinions of others.

Balance Information and Inquiry

Ultimately, it is up to a guide to determine the balance between information and inquiry on a tour. A well-balanced tour offers information that supports visitor comments and encourages further observations and inquiry—the visitors' observations should inform how much and when the guide imparts information. Avoid asking all the questions at the front end of your presentation and concluding with an information-blast. A skillful tour incorporates a blend of inquiry and information evenly layered throughout a tour.

Open-ended Questions

Questions asked on a tour should be open-ended to accommodate divergent perspectives. In order to encourage observations and generate ideas, open-ended questions should prompt multiple responses, for example, "How would you describe this person?" If the question only requires a brief and predictable answer, the question is close-ended. The question, "Who is this person?" asks visitors only to recall factual information; it does not stimulate reflective thinking.

Sequencing Questions

By sequencing questions you invite tour participants to look, support, and generate ideas. Begin with basic observation (describing) questions or exercises that encourage visitors to look closely (e.g. "Describe what you see." or "What's going on in this picture?"). Follow with a question that asks for supporting evidence (e.g. "What about his expression makes you say he is sad?" or "What do you see that makes you say that?"). Go deeper with a question that asks for further analysis and interpretation (e.g. "Why might the artist have painted it this way?").

The following question sequence - description, interpretation, and association – is adapted from The Great Books Foundation training manual.

1. Description Questions

Description questions can be answered by looking at the work of art. They often involve the subject matter or the visual elements, such as color, line, or shape.

These questions encourage tour participants to make observations and to support their observations with evidence. Some description questions encourage viewers to describe the

subject or action of an artwork, while others ask the viewers to analyze or describe how the elements are organized within the work of art.

Examples

- What's going on in this picture/sculpture/film? What do you see that makes you say that?
- How would you describe these figures? How would you describe this place?
- What kind of person do you think she is? What about her expression makes you say that?
- If you could touch this sculpture, how might it feel? What about the texture makes you say that?
- What do you think the climate/weather is like in this scene? What do you see that makes you say it is cold?
- How does the color in this painting differ from the one we just looked at?

2. Interpretation Questions

Interpretation questions help tour participants explore the meanings of works of art. They require viewers to offer opinions that can be supported by evidence from the work of art. These questions should offer the possibility for divergent opinions and the guide should remain open to all responses.

Examples

- How do you think the artist felt about this woman? What do you see that makes you say that? Why do you think the artist chose to place her in the back of this scene?
- Why do you think the artist chose to depict the figure void of any color? What do you think the artist wanted us to focus our attention on?
- How do you think the artist feels about her home, New York City, by this painting? What do you see that makes you say noisy and fast? Consider the colors she has used to depict the city, what do you think they express about how she felt?

3. Association Questions

Association questions ask viewers to consider to what extent an artist's viewpoint or a work of art has application to their own. Association questions can be fun and provocative and help people connect more closely to the work of art. Avoid overusing association questions. They are most effective after the artwork has been thoroughly explored and various interpretations have been discussed.

Examples

- If you could take this sculpture home with you, where would you display it? Why?
- What do you like most about this painting? Least? Why?
- If you lived in this house, what kinds of activities would you do in this room? Explain?
- What kind of animal would you depict? Why?

Tips for Successful Inquiry on Tours

1. Ask open-ended questions that encourage multiple responses.
2. Ask follow-up questions that encourage even closer looking and invite individuals to support their observations with evidence from the artwork being discussed.
3. Ask questions that are appropriate for the group (consider age, experience with looking at art, language skills, etc.).
4. Avoid run-on questions.
5. Avoid asking “yes or no” questions. These types of questions stop a discussion as soon as the responses are given.
6. Avoid asking questions that begin with “Can you. . .” or “Who can. . .”
These types of questions automatically set participants up to fail if they “can not”.
7. Do not be afraid of silence. Allow people time to observe, process and respond.
8. Listen to responses and treat all serious responses as equal even if you think some are not the “right” answers.
9. Be flexible enough to let participants’ responses determine how the discussion of an artwork will unfold.

Visual Thinking Strategies

As you prepare questions for an inquiry-based tour, be sure to consider the basic questions used in the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS).