

Open-ended Questions

These are questions that can generate multiple responses. They can lead to or open the discussion into other avenues that interest visitors. One visitor's idea or observation might expand on what other visitors are thinking. A visitor can draw attention to a detail that hasn't been noticed before or introduce a theme or interpretation that hasn't been considered before – even facilitators hear and learn new things about a piece of art they've used many times before.

Characteristics of good open-ended questions:

- Allow for many responses
- Require no prior knowledge about art or the art work being considered
- Encourage closer looking at the art to form an answer
- Allow visitors to draw on their own experience, ideas and perceptions of the art

Characteristics of poor questions:

- Call for 'yes' or 'no' as an answer
- Ask for the right answer
- Test knowledge of the art work
- Ask a 'leading' question (i.e., the question contains the answer)

Types of open-ended questions:

- Description/Observation (*How would you describe the clothing in this art work?*)
- Impressions or Moods (*How does this art work make you feel?*)
- Imagination (*If the people here were speaking, what might they say to each other?*)
- Clarification/Explanation (*Tell me more about that.*)
- Personal Experience (*If you've worn a mask before, what was it like? How do you think it would feel to wear this mask?*)
- Analyze the art; develop Information (*The artist traveled extensively across the American West. What can we find in this art work that might show that influence?*)
- Interpret (The title of this painting is Lynch Family. How does that information change or affect your view of this piece?)

Compare and Contrast Questions are very useful:

- Engage visitors without being threatening
- Provide relief from concentrating on just one piece; helps if conversation is 'stuck'
- Visitor doesn't need prior art knowledge
- Offer an opportunity for discovery and surprise
- Help encourage those in the group to talk to each other

Some good Compare and Contrast questions:

- How are the figures in this painting similar to and different from each other?
- These two pieces were made about the same time. How are they similar to and different from each other?
- Let's focus on the facial features of the two figures you see here. What do you imagine each could be thinking?
- We just looked at an Egyptian sarcophagus. How is this Roman sarcophagus similar to and different from the one created in ancient Egypt?

What are some good open-ended questions (with some follow-ups)?

- What's going on in this painting? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find? (VTS)
- What's the first thing you noticed about this work of art? Why did you look there?
- What surprises you or intrigues you about this work of art?
- If you could ask the artist one thing about this piece, what would it be?
- How would you describe this work of art to someone who isn't here today?
- If you could touch the [object] in this painting, how would it feel?
- If you were standing in this piece of art, perhaps off to the side, what would you smell (or hear)?
- What if I told you the title of this piece is [name]? How does that change your view?
- All of the pieces here were found in a tomb. Knowing that, what can we discover about how the objects might have been used by those who placed them there?
- If this scene were a movie or a television show, what would happen next?
- Thinking of all the pieces we've talked about today on our tour, which one would you want to take home and why?

What are some questions that aren't open-ended, that can halt the conversation?

- Where did Monet paint this picture of his Water Lilies? (calls for art knowledge)
- What medium did the artist use to create this? (calls for art knowledge)
- Was this Native American jar functional? (calls for art knowledge)
- What stone is that on the necklace we're looking at? (calls for art knowledge)
- How were Napoleon's royal court and household organized? (calls for historical knowledge and is just too hard!)
- Why do you think the artist put symbols of rain on this jar made by the Pueblo tribes? (leading question)
- Would you say the woman in this painting looks sad? (leading question)

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Beyond Art History -
Adult Questioning Strategies

Craig Anderson
Karen Skillett

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