



Resource

Alternative to a Think-Aloud, Using Famous Paintings

Have you ever taught something and then your students didn't get it? And then taught it again and your student still didn't get it? Instead of repeating this dead-end cycle, try teaching the skill without a text. Instead, use paintings. Turn your class into Art History 101! Your kids will love the rigor. I swear. Through a series of questions, students end up being able to do the skill using a painting and translate that ability to being able to do it with a text. I love using paintings to reinforce a skill or build on a skill.

Here's an example of a lesson using a famous painting. This lesson assumes students have the ability to identify theme and now need to match relevant details.

Aim — To find the best details to support a theme.

Criteria — Details that support a theme:

- Connect to the plot: character, setting, problem
- Are proof of the author's lesson
- Are not vague or confusing

Start by showing the iconic image “The Flower Carrier” by Diego Rivera,¹¹⁴ which shows a male farmer crouching with a large basket full of flowers and a woman helping him hold it on his back.

Ask: “What details do you see?” List on board. Pull all details.

Ask: “Where does this picture take place? How do you know?”

Ask: “What are they doing? How do you know? How does the man feel?

What details in the picture support that thinking? Diego Rivera is trying to give us a lesson about farming life. What is he teaching us?

Therefore, what is a theme of the painting?

Say: Go back to the list of details. Rank the top five details that you believe showcase the theme. Now cross out details that aren’t related to the setting, problem, or characters. Are any of your details confusing? Cross them out.

Which details are related to a character, problem, or setting? Those details are best to support theme. Now find the one that you think most likely shows the author’s lesson.

Students then force rank, or determine which is their #1 theme-based detail. After a class discussion in which students argue their answers, the teacher moves onto guided practice, in which she models the same process and asks the same questions, but this time uses text instead of a painting.

114. Diego Rivera. “The Flower Carrier,” oil and tempura on Masonite, c. 1935 (Modern of Modern Art, San Francisco).