

Middle School Self-Guide

At the National Portrait Gallery, we examine portraits as texts filled with visual clues that can lead us toward a richer understanding of the featured individual and his or her era. This guide will help you facilitate Reading Portraiture experiences and Looking Strategies with your own students as you explore our collection.

READING PORTRAITURE

The prompts below will help you encourage your students to “read” a portrait before reading the museum label or other sources. They can also be used as a springboard for broader conversations about art, history, and biography.

1. Start by defining “portrait,” “sitter,” “symbol,” and other key terms with your students. Use our Key Terms guide for reference.
2. Have your students identify the specific choices that artists make when they create portraits. We call these choices the Elements of Portrayal, which include clothing, pose, facial expression, setting, objects, hairstyle, color, medium, scale, and artistic style.
3. Building on the students’ observations and visual descriptions, discuss the sitter using some or all of the following questions:
 - What can we learn about the sitter and his or her era based on the elements of portrayal and composition that we see in the portrait? What can we tell about the sitter’s accomplishments or personality?
 - How does the artist’s choice of medium affect the portrait? How might you view the sitter differently if the artist had used a different medium?
 - How does the artist want us to remember or think about the sitter? What artistic choices support your answer to this question?
 - How is this portrait similar to or different from other portraits near it in the Gallery? What might those similarities and/or differences reflect about the similarities and differences between the sitters and their eras?

LOOKING STRATEGIES

The Looking Strategies recommended here are effective and engaging tools to involve your students in a close reading of the portraits and in rich conversations about the sitters. As the facilitator of these activities, you will want to identify in advance what key points about the portrait and the sitter that you want your students to take away from the exercise. Visit the Self-Guides web page for these Looking Strategies worksheets. We have suggested portraits for each Looking Strategy (except Timeline), but feel free to choose your own.

Compare and Contrast
7 Ways to Look at a Portrait

Puzzle
Timeline

Claim-Support-Question