

MEMBERSHIP

DR GACHET



About this activity

An art lesson plan which makes use of one of Vincent van Gogh's last paintings

- ▶ **Language level:** A1 / A2
- ▶ **Age of learner:** Upper primary to adult
- ▶ **Duration of activity:** 30 minutes
- ▶ **Main task:** Asking questions; dictation
- ▶ **Topics:** Art; Vincent van Gogh; mental health
- ▶ **Language focus:** Question forms

For this activity, you will need two images, both of which are supplied separately in the accompanying Canva slideshow.

Note: For all materials and discussion, go to the corresponding page in the Resources section:

<https://membership.lessonstream.com/resources/dr-gachet/>



The images

Vincent van Gogh spent his last months in the care of Dr Paul Gachet in Auvers-sur-Oise near Paris. During this time, the artist continued to paint prolifically while seeking treatment for his mental health struggles. Just weeks before his suicide, van Gogh painted two portraits of Dr Gachet. These can be seen as attempts to capture not just the doctor's physical appearance but also his inner character and the emotional connection that van Gogh felt towards him. It has been speculated that this might include a recognition of shared struggles with mental illness.



Activity outline

1. Stand or sit in front of your students with the first image in hand. This can be displayed on a mobile device or it can be a printed copy. It is important that your students cannot see the image but know that it is there.

Now tell your students the following:



I am looking at a picture.
 I can see it but you can't!
 It's a picture of a doctor.
 You might know him but you probably don't.
 This is a doctor who is famous for one of his patients.
 And when you see the picture, you will know immediately who the patient is.
 My questions are:

- Who is the patient?
- How do we know who the patient is, just by looking at this picture?

2. Repeat the text two or three times. Then invite students to ask you closed questions to work out the answer to the questions (Closed questions = questions to which the answer can only be yes or no).

Answer: The patient is Vincent van Gogh.

Tip: Of course, for this part of the activity to work, students will need to know who Vincent van Gogh is. Bear in mind that despite being a renowned figure in Western art, his fame might not be as widespread in non-Western cultures or among younger learners.

Tip: Students will probably start by making guesses about the identity of the patient (*Is it a real person? Is it someone from history? Are they still alive? Is it a man or a woman?*) This is fine but also encourage students to think about the second question: How do we know who the patient is, just by looking at the picture? In order to arrive at an answer via this route, students will have to establish the following information:

- The patient is not visible in the picture.
- The picture is a painting.
- The artist is the patient.
- The artist is famous and has an instantly recognisable style.



3. Show students the first image and ask if they like it. Ask them to guess when it was painted and find out what they know about the artist. Then give the following information:

This is one of Vincent van Gogh's last paintings. He painted it in 1890, just a few weeks before he died. The man is Dr Paul Gachet. He took care of van Gogh during the final years of the artist's life. Van Gogh described the painting as, "Sad but gentle, yet clear and intelligent".

4. Remove the image from your students' view and tell them that you are going to test their memory with 10 sentences. Some of these are true and some are false.

Now give students the following sentences and ask them to decide which ones are true and which ones are false. (The sentences are included in the accompanying slideshow.)

- Dr Gachet is wearing a blue hat.
- He is resting his head on his left hand.
- He is looking at us.
- He has blue eyes.
- He has dark hair.
- He looks sad.
- You can see three buttons on his coat.
- The table is red.
- There are two books on the table.
- There is a flower in his left hand.

Tip: For a materials free option, dictate the sentences or ask students to copy them from board to book. During this stage, if a student thinks that a sentence is true, they should write it as it is. On the other hand, if the student thinks that a sentence is false, they should change it accordingly. Demonstrate this with an example:

The original sentence: "Dr Gachet is wearing a blue hat."

Students could write any of: { "Dr Gachet is wearing a blue hat."
"Dr Gachet is wearing a hat but it's not blue."
"Dr Gachet is not wearing a hat."

5. Let students compare what they have written. Then go over the ten sentences and listen to their answers. Provide language feedback when necessary but do not disclose which sentences are true and which are false at this stage. If you chose the dictation option, display the sentences on the screen for everyone to see.

6. Tell students that you are going to show them the painting again. This will allow them to see which sentences are true and which are false. However, there is a twist: instead of showing the same image, show the alternative version of the portrait. Will anyone notice the discrepancy?



7. If no one notices that the painting has changed, tell students that they have failed the test. Tell them that Vincent van Gogh actually painted two versions of Dr Gachet's portrait and there are some differences between them.

Display the true and false sentences once again and ask students to turn them all into questions. They can do this in pairs. Encourage students to think about the grammar and write the questions down.

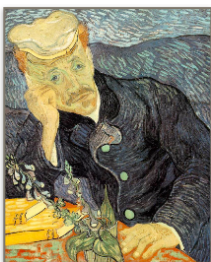
Tip: Give students an example and show them that for each sentence, there are different possible questions to ask. For the first sentence, for example, students could write any of the following:

- What colour is his hat?
- Is he wearing a hat and if so, what colour is it?
- Is he wearing a blue/red/green hat?

| True and false sentences | Possible questions |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Gachet is wearing a blue hat. • He is resting his head on his left hand. • He is looking at us. • He has blue eyes. • He has dark hair. • He looks sad. • You can see three buttons on his coat. • The table is red. • There are two books on the table. • There is a flower in his left hand. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is he wearing a (blue/red) hat? What colour is it? • Is he resting his head on his hand? Which hand? • Is he looking at us? • Does he have blue eyes? What colour are they? • Does he have dark hair? What colour is his hair? • Does he look sad? • How many buttons can we see on his coat? • Is the table red? What colour is it? • Are there any books on the table? How many? • Is there a flower in his left hand? |

8. Continue as you began (step 1 on page 2) with the first image in hand. Tell students that you are looking at the first portrait of Dr Gachet. You can see it but they cannot. Now go over all of the questions that students prepared. In each case, answer the questions about the first portrait, but only if the grammar is good.

9. Finally, show students both versions of the painting, side by side. Ask them which version they prefer and why.



Version one
Private collection



Version two
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

In 1990, the first version of the portrait was sold to Japanese businessman Ryoei Saito for \$82.5 million. This made it the world's most expensive painting at the time. Saito caused controversy when he commented that he would have the painting cremated with him after his death. Since his death in 1996, there has been no public information about the location and ownership of the portrait.