Overview of Visible Thinking Routine Ideas

What Are Visible Thinking Routines?

Visible Thinking routines are short, repeatable instructional strategies designed to make students' thinking explicit and observable. Rather than focusing only on content recall, these routines emphasize reasoning, interpretation, questioning, and reflection. They help students articulate how they arrive at ideas and how their thinking changes over time.

These routines are especially effective in:

- Reading and writing workshops
- Inquiry-based social studies and science
- Project-based learning
- Discussion-driven classrooms

Why Use Visible Thinking Routines?

Visible Thinking routines:

- Develop metacognitive awareness
- Support academic language and discourse
- Encourage evidence-based reasoning
- Normalize uncertainty and revision
- Promote inclusive and structured discussion

Because they are brief and reusable, they function well as daily thinking habits rather than one-time activities.

Core Categories of Visible Thinking Routines

1. Routines for Observing and Describing

These routines slow down student thinking and emphasize careful observation before interpretation.

Common routines

- See–Think–Wonder
- Notice–Think–Wonder
- What Makes You Say That?

Best used for

- Analyzing images, artifacts, or maps
- Introducing primary sources
- Scientific observation
- Launching close reading

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2. Routines for Interpreting and Reasoning

These routines help students form claims and support them with evidence and reasoning.

Common routines

- Claim–Support–Question
- I Used to Think… Now I Think…
- What Makes You Say That?

Best used for

- Literary analysis
- Argument writing
- Historical interpretation
- Theme and thesis development

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3. Routines for Questioning and Inquiry

These routines promote curiosity and guide students toward deeper investigation.

Common routines

- Question Starts
- Think–Puzzle–Explore
- Compass Points (E–W–N–S)

Best used for

- Research projects
- Unit introductions
- Problem-based learning
- Debate preparation

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4. Routines for Connecting Ideas

These routines help students synthesize information and connect new learning to prior knowledge.

Common routines

- Connect–Extend–Challenge
- Color–Symbol–Image
- Headlines

Best used for

- Cross-text comparisons
- Synthesis writing
- Unit summaries
- Portfolio reflections

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5. Routines for Perspective-Taking

These routines encourage students to consider multiple viewpoints and contexts.

Common routines

- Circle of Viewpoints
- Step Inside
- Structured Think–Pair–Share

Best used for

- History and civics discussions
- Ethical dilemmas
- Literature character analysis
- Social-emotional learning

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6. Routines for Reflection and Metacognition

These routines make learning progress visible by tracking changes in thinking.

Common routines

- I Used to Think… Now I Think…

- 3–2–1 Bridge
- What Do You Know? What Do You Wonder?

Best used for

- End-of-unit reflection
- Writing revision
- Self-assessment
- Portfolio checkpoints

Implementation Tips

- Use routines consistently so students internalize the structures
- Post and model sentence frames
- Integrate routines into group roles (recorder, connector, challenger)
- Capture thinking through notebooks, exit tickets, or discussion protocols

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Summary

Visible Thinking routines cultivate a classroom culture in which reasoning, questioning, and reflection are routine expectations. Over time, students move from using structured prompts to independently applying these thinking strategies across disciplines.

Universal Visible Thinking Group Guide

Purpose

This guide helps student groups **make their thinking visible** while reading, observing, discussing, and creating. Groups use structured routines to clarify ideas, support claims with evidence, ask meaningful questions, and reflect on how their thinking changes.

Group Norms

- Everyone participates and listens respectfully
- Ideas are supported with evidence from the text or task
- Disagreement is framed as inquiry, not conflict
- Thinking can change as new evidence emerges

Group Roles

(Assign or rotate each session)

Facilitator

- Keeps the group focused on the routine
- Ensures all voices are heard
- Reads the guiding questions aloud

Evidence Finder

- Locates specific evidence (quotes, data, examples)
- Cites where ideas come from

Connector

- Links ideas to prior learning, real-world examples, or other texts
- Identifies patterns or themes

Challenger

- Asks clarifying and probing questions
- Pushes the group to explain reasoning

Recorder

- Captures group thinking in writing or on a shared document
- Summarizes conclusions and remaining questions

Universal Visible Thinking Routine Flow

Groups follow this same sequence regardless of content.

Step 1: Observe

Focus on careful noticing before interpretation.

Group prompts

- What do we notice first?
- What details stand out?
- What seems important or repeated?

Step 2: Interpret

Move from observation to meaning-making.

Group prompts

- What might this mean?
- What ideas or claims can we make?
- What patterns or themes are emerging?

Step 3: Support with Evidence

Ground ideas in the text, source, or task.

Group prompts

- What evidence supports our thinking?
- Where do we see this in the text or source?
- What makes us say that?

Step 4: Question

Identify uncertainties and areas for deeper inquiry.

Group prompts

- What questions do we still have?
- What is unclear or confusing?
- What would we want to explore next?

Step 5: Connect

Link learning across contexts.

Group prompts

- How does this connect to prior learning?
- How does it connect to real-world issues or experiences?
- How does it extend or challenge what we already know?

Step 6: Reflect

Examine how thinking has evolved.

Group prompts

- How has our thinking changed?
- What did we initially think?
- What do we think now and why?

Sentence Frames for Academic Discourse

Use as needed to support discussion.

- “We noticed that…”
- “This might suggest that…”
- “The evidence for this is…”
- “A question we still have is…”
- “This connects to…”
- “At first we thought…, but now we think…”

Group Output Options

Each group produces at least one visible artifact.

Possible formats:

- Written group summary
- Chart paper or shared document
- Exit reflection
- Claim–evidence paragraph
- Question list for further inquiry

Teacher Checkpoints

During group work, look for:

- Use of evidence in discussion
- Equitable participation
- Clear movement from observation to interpretation
- Meaningful questions and reflection

Adaptations

- **ELL**: Provide sentence frames and allow oral responses
- **Advanced learners**: Require counterclaims or alternative interpretations
- **Independent work**: Students complete the same steps individually

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Closing Reflection (Individual or Group)

- What idea are we most confident about?
- What question remains most important?
- How did our group's thinking evolve?

Summary

This Universal Visible Thinking Group Guide creates a consistent structure for deep thinking across disciplines. By repeating the same flow—observe, interpret, support, question, connect, reflect—students internalize habits of thoughtful inquiry that transfer to reading, writing, discussion, and problem-solving.

Visible Thinking Group Guide

Student Handout

Purpose

This guide helps your group **show how you are thinking**, not just what answer you choose. You will observe carefully, explain ideas, use evidence, ask questions, and reflect on how your thinking changes.

Group Roles

(Your teacher may assign or rotate these.)

- **Facilitator** – Keeps the group focused and ensures everyone speaks
- **Evidence Finder** – Finds quotes, data, or examples from the text or task
- **Connector** – Links ideas to prior learning, real life, or other texts
- **Challenger** – Asks clarifying and "why" questions
- **Recorder** – Writes down the group's thinking

The Visible Thinking Process

Use these steps in order.

1. Observe

Look closely before explaining.

- What do we notice?
- What details stand out?
- What seems important?

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2. Interpret

Explain what the observations might mean.

- What ideas or claims can we make?
- What patterns or themes do we see?
- What might this suggest?

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3. Support with Evidence

Back up ideas with proof.

- What evidence supports our thinking?
- Where do we see this in the text or source?
- What makes us say that?

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4. Question

Identify what is unclear or worth exploring.

- What questions do we still have?
- What is confusing or uncertain?
- What should we investigate next?

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5. Connect

Link ideas across contexts.

- How does this connect to prior learning?
- How does it connect to the real world?
- How does it extend or challenge what we thought before?

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6. Reflect

Think about how your thinking changed.

- What did we think at first?
- What do we think now?
- Why did our thinking change?

Helpful Sentence Starters

Use these to support discussion and writing.

- “We noticed that…”
- “This might suggest that…”
- “The evidence for this is…”
- “One question we still have is…”
- “This connects to…”

- “At first we thought…, but now we think…”

Group Product

Your group must create **one visible record** of your thinking:

- Written summary
- Claim + evidence paragraph
- Question list
- Reflection response

Exit Reflection

Answer one before finishing:

- What idea are we most confident about?
- What question is still important?
- How did our thinking change today?

Remember: Good thinking includes questions, evidence, and revision. Changing your mind is part of learning.