

GRADES 6–8 · AGES 11–14 · 55 MINUTES · SOCRATIC SEMINAR

Is it art if a machine made it?

THE PROPOSITION

"An image generated by AI can be real art."

A Socratic seminar on what makes something art and who deserves credit when a model trained on millions of human images produces something new. Copyright and consent enter through the side door – the artists whose work trained the model.

STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO

- Explain how an image generator produces a picture from a prompt and training data.
- Distinguish the questions 'is it art?', 'who made it?', and 'was it fair to the artists in the training set?'
- Participate in a seminar by building on and challenging others with reference to the text.

VOCABULARY FROM THE FIELD GUIDE

Generative AI · Training data · Copyright & training · Consent (data use) · Prompt

WHAT'S IN THIS PACK

- Teacher guide: background, vocabulary, agenda, format, positions, questions, roles, rubric.
- Student handouts (photocopy one per student): position organizer, sentence starters, exit ticket.
- Standards: CCSS ELA SL.6.1 / SL.7.1 / SL.8.1 (seminar discussion); CCSS ELA RI.7.8 / RI.8.8 (trace and evaluate an argument); CCSS ELA W.7.1 / W.8.1; National Core Arts Standards Re.8 / Cn.11 (interpret intent, relate art to context).

PRINT

US Letter, plain paper, duplex. Teacher pages once; student pages one per student. Free to photocopy for classroom and homeschool use. Not for resale.

Background for the teacher

Read this before class. Students get a version of the same facts on their handout; you get the framing and the traps.

Image generators are trained on hundreds of millions of image-caption pairs scraped from the web, most without the artist's knowledge. They do not paste images together; they learn statistical patterns of style and subject and produce new pixels. Whether that is 'learning like a student' or 'copying at scale' is the center of active lawsuits.

In 2022 an AI-generated image won a digital-art category at a state fair, and the artist who prompted it argued he had spent eighty hours refining prompts and edits. Critics said the model – and the uncredited artists it learned from – did the work. Both arguments are worth taking seriously.

Keep three questions separate: Is the output art? (aesthetics.) Who is the author? (credit.) Was it fair to use those artists' work as training data? (consent, copyright.) Students tend to collapse them. The seminar works best when the teacher names which question a comment is answering.

RUNNING DISCUSSION IN GRADES 6–8

Evidence enters the room. Students can hold a position they don't believe, and that's the point.

- Assign sides. Arguing a position you didn't choose is the fastest way to learn what the other side actually thinks.
- Require one piece of evidence per claim – a fact from the background sheet, a personal example, or a definition.
- Separate 'what is true' from 'what should we do.' Most middle-school debates tangle the two.
- Watch for the pile-on. If one side is winning on volume, pause and give the other side a 60-second huddle.

Vocabulary

Pulled from the Hi, Bot AI concepts field guide (hibot.space/learn/concepts). Read each card aloud, then have the class rewrite it in ten words or fewer.

Generative AI

AI that creates new text, images, audio, or code – not just classifies.

Generative systems produce novel outputs from prompts: essays, logos, music, Python scripts. That's different from traditional ML that mostly labels or ranks (spam vs. not spam, which photo contains a cat). Most public excitement since 2022 is about generative models, especially LLMs and image generators.

Training data

The examples a model learned from – often the whole internet, licensed corpora, or both.

Training data is the text, images, or logs used during training. Quality, consent, copyright, and representation in that data shape model behavior. When people ask "where did it learn that?", they're asking about training data and fine-tuning – usually opaque for closed models.

WHERE PEOPLE ARGUE

Copyright, consent, and "fair use for training" are active legal and political fights worldwide.

Copyright & training

Who owns the inputs models learned from – and who owns the outputs.

Copyright debates ask whether scraping books, art, or code to train models infringes creators' rights, and whether AI-generated works are protectable. Laws differ by country and are still unsettled. For users: assuming "the model said it, so I can publish it" is risky – verify rights on sources and outputs.

Consent (data use)

Whether people agreed to their data being used to train or fine-tune systems.

Consent questions arise when personal writing, medical records, student work, or biometric data might enter a training or fine-tuning pipeline. Schools and companies often ban pasting identifiable student data into public models for this reason. "Public on the web" is not the same as "consented for AI training" in many ethical frameworks.

Prompt

The instruction or question you give a model.

A prompt is whatever you send in: a question, a document to summarize, a role ("act as a tutor"), constraints ("under 200 words"), or examples of the format you want. Better prompts are specific about goal, audience, and what "good" looks like. Vague prompts reliably produce vague answers.

Warm-up

6 minutes.

Show two images side by side without labels – one by a human illustrator, one generated. Vote: which is art? Then reveal. Ask whether anyone's vote changed, and why that's interesting.

Agenda - 55 minutes

Minutes	Segment	What happens
0-6	Warm-up	Two images, blind vote, reveal.
6-14	Read the text	Students read the background sheet and the four vocabulary cards. Underline one sentence they agree with and one they doubt.
14-40	Socratic seminar	Circle. Opening question from the teacher, then students carry it. Teacher tracks which of the three questions each comment addresses and names it aloud when they blur.
40-48	Outer-circle debrief	If using a fishbowl variant, observers report: strongest claim, best question, moment the conversation moved.
48-55	Written position	Exit ticket: one paragraph answering the question with a concession.

How socratic seminar runs

Students sit in a circle with a short text or definition in hand. The teacher asks an opening question and then mostly stays quiet; students talk to each other, cite the text, build on and challenge one another. No hands – a speaker finishes, then the next speaks. The goal is understanding, not winning.

GROUND RULES – POST THESE

1. Attack ideas, never people. "That claim has a hole" – not "you're wrong."
2. One voice at a time. The listener's job is to be able to repeat what was said.
3. Evidence beats volume. A quiet fact outranks a loud opinion.
4. Changing your mind is winning. Say so out loud when it happens.
5. No hands. Wait for the speaker to finish; then speak.
6. Refer to the text at least once before you give an opinion.

The two positions

Starter arguments are scaffolds, not scripts. Strong teams find their own. Assign sides where the format calls for it; students record their real view on the exit ticket.

Perspective – it's art, and the prompter is the artist

Art is about intent and choice; the person prompting makes hundreds of choices.

- Photography was called 'not art' too – the camera does the work, people said.
- Collage and sampling in music borrow from others and are still art.
- Eighty hours of prompting and editing is real creative labor.

Perspective – it isn't art, or the credit belongs elsewhere

The model learned from artists who never agreed; the output is theirs, statistically.

- Typing a description isn't the same as making the thing described.
- A student learning from a master is one person. A model learned from millions without asking.
- If nobody can be an author, it's a product, not an artwork.

Discussion questions

OPENING

1. What has to be true for something to count as art?

CORE

1. If a model learned from a million artists, did it copy them or learn from them? Does the difference matter?
2. Should an artist be able to say no to their work being used for training? What would that cost?
3. Who should get credit when a prompt produces a beautiful image – the prompter, the model's makers, the training artists, nobody?

CLOSING

1. If you could write one rule for AI art, what would it be and who would it protect?

Roles

Role	Job
Text tracker	Notes each time a speaker cites the background sheet; reports the count.

Role	Job
Question sorter	Names which of the three questions a comment addresses.
Bridge	Invites a student who hasn't spoken in five minutes.
Observer (outer circle)	Tallies claims vs. questions; reports the moment the conversation shifted.

Assessment rubric

Share this before the debate. Judges and self-assessors use the same sheet. 'Meets' is the target; note above or below in the margin.

Criterion	Meets
Claim	States a clear position that answers the question.
Evidence	Supports each claim with a fact, definition, or specific example.
Response	Restates the other side accurately before rebutting.
Vocabulary	Uses at least two lesson terms correctly.
Conduct	Follows ground rules; invites quieter voices in.

Exit ticket prompts

1. My position: ____.
2. The strongest point against my position: ____.
3. One rule I'd write for AI art: ____.

Extension

Find an artist's public statement about AI training (many have posted). Summarize their argument in three sentences and write your reply.

SEND HOME

Ask at home: 'Has anything you made – a photo, a post, a design – ended up somewhere you didn't expect? How did that feel?'

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS ELA SL.6.1 / SL.7.1 / SL.8.1 (seminar discussion)
- CCSS ELA RI.7.8 / RI.8.8 (trace and evaluate an argument)
- CCSS ELA W.7.1 / W.8.1
- National Core Arts Standards Re.8 / Cn.11 (interpret intent, relate art to context)

More lessons by grade band, and the full AI concepts field guide, at hibot.space/learn/debates. Tell us how it went: hello@hibot.space.

Is it art if a machine made it?

"An image generated by AI can be real art."

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Image generators are trained on hundreds of millions of image-caption pairs scraped from the web, most without the artist's knowledge. They do not paste images together; they learn statistical patterns of style and subject and produce new pixels. Whether that is 'learning like a student' or 'copying at scale' is the center of active lawsuits.

In 2022 an AI-generated image won a digital-art category at a state fair, and the artist who prompted it argued he had spent eighty hours refining prompts and edits. Critics said the model – and the uncredited artists it learned from – did the work. Both arguments are worth taking seriously.

Keep three questions separate: Is the output art? (aesthetics.) Who is the author? (credit.) Was it fair to use those artists' work as training data? (consent, copyright.) Students tend to collapse them. The seminar works best when the teacher names which question a comment is answering.

WORDS WE'LL USE

Generative AI – AI that creates new text, images, audio, or code – not just classifies.

Training data – The examples a model learned from – often the whole internet, licensed corpora, or both.

Copyright & training – Who owns the inputs models learned from – and who owns the outputs.

Consent (data use) – Whether people agreed to their data being used to train or fine-tune systems.

Prompt – The instruction or question you give a model.

MARK IT UP

Underline one sentence you agree with. Circle one you doubt. Write one question in the margin. Bring all three to the discussion.

Position organizer

Proposition: "An image generated by AI can be real art."

Name: _____ Side (assigned or chosen): _____

OUR CLAIM, IN ONE SENTENCE

THREE REASONS – AND THE EVIDENCE FOR EACH

Reason 1:

Evidence (a fact, a definition, or a specific example):

Reason 2:

Evidence (a fact, a definition, or a specific example):

Reason 3:

Evidence (a fact, a definition, or a specific example):

WHAT THE OTHER SIDE WILL SAY – AND OUR REPLY

Their best argument:

Our reply:

VOCABULARY I WILL USE CORRECTLY

[] Generative AI [] Training data [] Copyright & training [] Consent (data use) [] Prompt

Sentence starters

Use these until you don't need them. The goal is to respond to what was actually said.

- In the text it says ____, which suggests ____.
- I'd like to build on what ____ said: ____.
- I want to push back on ____, because ____.
- Which question are we answering right now – is it art, who made it, or was it fair?
- Can someone give an example of ____?

GROUND RULES

1. Attack ideas, never people. "That claim has a hole" – not "you're wrong."
2. One voice at a time. The listener's job is to be able to repeat what was said.
3. Evidence beats volume. A quiet fact outranks a loud opinion.
4. Changing your mind is winning. Say so out loud when it happens.
5. No hands. Wait for the speaker to finish; then speak.
6. Refer to the text at least once before you give an opinion.

HOW SOCRATIC SEMINAR WORKS

Students sit in a circle with a short text or definition in hand. The teacher asks an opening question and then mostly stays quiet; students talk to each other, cite the text, build on and challenge one another. No hands – a speaker finishes, then the next speaks. The goal is understanding, not winning.

YOUR ROLE TODAY

Role: _____

Role	Job
Text tracker	Notes each time a speaker cites the background sheet; reports the count.
Question sorter	Names which of the three questions a comment addresses.
Bridge	Invites a student who hasn't spoken in five minutes.
Observer (outer circle)	Tallies claims vs. questions; reports the moment the conversation shifted.

LISTENING TALLY

Keep count while others speak. Claims: ____ Evidence: ____ Questions: ____ Vocabulary used: ____
Minds changed: ____

Exit ticket

"An image generated by AI can be real art."

Name: _____ Date: _____

My position: ____.

The strongest point against my position: ____.

One rule I'd write for AI art: ____.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Criterion	Meets looks like	Me today (above / meets / below)
Claim	States a clear position that answers the question.	
Evidence	Supports each claim with a fact, definition, or specific example.	
Response	Restates the other side accurately before rebutting.	
Vocabulary	Uses at least two lesson terms correctly.	
Conduct	Follows ground rules; invites quieter voices in.	

TAKE IT HOME

Ask at home: 'Has anything you made – a photo, a post, a design – ended up somewhere you didn't expect? How did that feel?'