

HOW TO WRITE ABOUT ART?

Guide #1 for ARTH 106

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Visual Analysis

Visual Analysis is the fundamental unit of art historical writing. The purpose of a visual analysis is to recognize and interpret the visual choices the artist made in creating a work of art. A visual analysis addresses formal elements of a work of art (e.g., color, line, texture, perspective, size etc.) and examines their relationship to create or interpret meaning of the work as a whole.

To write a good visual analysis, you must look closely at a work of art and translate your visual observations into written text. However, visual analysis does not simply mean describing what you see in a work of art. It requires that you analyze how formal elements impact the meaning of the artwork.

I have provided some basic visual analysis writing questions and tips to apply to the works respectively although you are free to approach the material from different angles suited to your own critical analysis.

I. INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

To write a good visual analysis, you should look closely at a work of art. Observe the artwork and write down your observations. Be precise. Consider composition, color, texture, size, space, and other visual elements.

- What is my first response to the work?
- When and where was the work made?
- Where would the work originally have been seen? Who is the audience?
- What is the *title*? Does it help to illuminate the work?
- How do the formal elements convey theme, mood, or visual interest?
- What kind of claim would you make about the meaning of the work?

Target your description and visual analysis and address only those elements that are relevant to your main claim.

II. PAINTING

1. Identification

- Who is the artist?
- What is the title of the painting? What is the subject represented?
- Where and when was the work painted? Who was the intended audience?

2. Subject Matter

- What type of work is it? (religious, historical, allegorical, genre, still life, portrait, landscape etc.)
- What is the dominant narrative presented in the work?

3. Use of space/perspective

- What is the actual size/format of the work?
- What is the relationship of the shapes to the frame? Are they harmonious or discordant?

4. Technique

- What materials are used?
- What kinds of colors are used?
- How is the paint applied: thickly or thinly, with a fine or coarse brush, or by other means?
- Are colors transparent or opaque?
- Have other materials been used, as in a collage?

5. Composition (arrangement of the parts that form the whole)

- Organization: Is it simple or complex? Geometrically ordered or free and seemingly accidental? Do some forms dominate others? Is there symmetry? Is the painting crowded or spacious? Do the shapes vary or do they repeat?
- Individual units: Are there many or few? Are they large or small (in relation to both the outside world and to the picture area)? What kinds of patterns do they form? What are the proportions of solid and broken areas? Is the emphasis on central or marginal areas? Are forms multi-dimensional or flat?
- Lines: Are lines sharp or fuzzy? Thick or Thin? Angular or curved? Controlled or spontaneous
- Colors: Are they bright or subdued ('saturated' or 'low-key')? Are there many colors or few (is the palette 'wide' or 'limited')? Are the dominant colors warm (reds, oranges, yellows) or cool (blues, grays, greens)? Are there moderate or extreme contrasts? Large areas or small patches? Repetitions or echoes?
- Light: Is there a consistent source? Is the source inside or outside the picture? Is light used to emphasize parts of the picture, to create mood?
- Space: Is the space shallow or deep, open or screened? Is the emphasis on solids or voids (intervals)? What kind of perspective is used (linear or aerial)? Is the main

interest near or far? Is space suggested by in-depth or recessed planes? Is there any overlap? What is the degree of illusion?

Citing Sources (Remember to document your sources too!)

If you use any sources you should remember that you **are required to document all of your sources**, including ideas, paraphrases, quotations, and references to a complete text you are citing or relying on. Please use one of the following citation styles in the correct format.

MLA (The Modern Language Association)

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>

The Chicago Manual of Style

http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

Give images you use a figure number and a basic caption (artist's name, title, date, medium etc.) Remember to properly cite where you found the images too.

This guide was adapted in September 2013 from the following sources: Hunter College Writing Center's guide ["Writing about Art"](#); *Look! The Fundamentals of Art History* by Anne D'Alleva; *A Short Guide to Writing about Art* by Sylvan Barnet, and *Film Art: An Introduction* (7th ed.) by Bordwell & Thompson. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004, 3marshall.ucsd.edu/_files/doc/RCFilmFormHandout.pdf