



WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Writing about Art: Asking Questions

Any work of art provokes a response in the viewer. Your task as writer is to define and discuss the choices and techniques the artist has used to provoke your particular response. It is essential to explain the basis of your response by referring to particular characteristics in the work you are discussing. Depending on the requirements of an assignment, you can:

- consider alternative choices the artist might have made and how these would have impacted on the character of the work;
- compare a given work to others, trying to define what makes them different or similar;
- research the artist and the period in which s/he worked so as to place the work within the historical context;
- survey critical opinion about the artist and work.

PAINTING

Asking questions about a work of art helps to identify information that could be useful in formulating your response and in preparing your analysis and evaluation. The list that follows incorporates questions to ask when you look at a painting.

Identification

- who is the artist?
- what is the subject or title?
- where and when was the work painted?

Subject Matter

- what type of painting is it?
 - religious
 - historical
 - allegorical
 - scene of everyday life (genre)
 - still life
 - portrait
 - landscape
 - architectural view
- if the painting seems to belong to two categories, does one dominate?

Frame and Pictorial Area

- what is actual size of picture: (height precedes width)?
- what is the proportion of height to width?
- what is the relationship of the shapes to the frame? harmonious? discordant?
- does the frame cut the shapes?

Technique

- what materials are used: wood, canvas, cardboard, paper?
- what kind of colors are used: oil, tempura, watercolor, pastel?
- how is the paint applied: thickly or thinly, with a fine or coarse brush, by other means?
- are colors transparent or opaque?
- have other materials been used?

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)? are the shapes regular or irregular? what kinds of patterns do they form? what is the proportion between solid and broken areas? is the emphasis on center or marginal areas? how ornate are the shapes? are forms rounded or flat?
- **lines**: are lines clear or obscure? delicate or assertive? angular or curved? are there lines at all?
- **colors**: are they bright or subdued (“saturated” or “low-key”)? plain or rare? are there many colors or few? (“wide” or “limited” palette)? does any color dominate? 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? are there strong or muted contrasts? how much shadow? what is the function of shadows: to clarify form or space, emphasize certain parts of the picture, create mood?
- **space**: is the space shallow or deep, open or screened? is the emphasis on solids or voids (i.e., intervals)? what kind of perspective is used (linear, aerial)? is the main interest near or far? is space suggested by planes in depth or recession? overlapping? what is the degree of illusion?

Function

- is the painting an altar piece, a devotional image, a cabinet picture, etc? how might function affect form?

Considerations for Particular Types of Subject Matter

Portraits

- how much of the figure is shown?
- how large is it in the frame (how much pictorial space does the figure occupy)?
- what is the background or setting?
- is the figure in action?
- is there any indication of the figure's trade, profession, class, etc.?
- what is the figure's relationship to the spectator (intimate, aloof)?
- what kind of clothing is the figure wearing: rich or plain, tight or loose-fitting, formal or casual, etc.?
- what is the proportion of face to figure?
- how does the portrait deviate from the norm?

When you write about a portrait, remember that the primary object of your analysis is not the historical personage who is the subject of your portrait, but the character the artist has created in the picture. Always remember that what you see is the artist's interpretation, which stresses aspects important to him or to the model or to their time.

Figurative Scenes

- what kind of story is depicted? (religious, mythological, historical, allegorical, scene from everyday life)
- is the action calm or dramatic?
- are there many figures or few?
- are the figures small or large in relation to the size of the picture?
- what is the setting? (indoors, outdoors)
- what role does the setting play?
- is the main action stressed or obscured?

What was the original function of the picture? was it done for a public or private place? is it complete or a fragment? is it possible to make a reasoned statement about the artist's aim? does he wish to elevate the spirit, instruct, moralize, entertain, satisfy his own need for expression?

Landscape

- what is the size of the area shown?
- what is the spectator's viewpoint?
- how far can we see into the picture?
- what kind of place is shown? cultivated fields, woods, riverbank?
- can the season or time of day be determined?
- what kind of human activity is shown, if any?
- what kind of architectural elements appear and what is their thematic and spatial relationship to the site?
- what is the proportion of cloud to sky? plain to elevation? water to land? open to closed areas?
- what is the general character of the scene: attractive, forbidding, calm, turbulent, spectacular, intimate? what elements determine the effect: lighting, color scheme, spatial organization?

General Observations

- how consistent is the structure of the whole?
- what is the degree of variety or sameness?
- does the work seem spontaneous or calculated?
- how do the formal elements convey theme, mood, visual interest?

SCULPTURE

Identification

- what is the title or subject?
- when and where was it made?
- what medium was used?

Subject Matter

- what is shown?
- does subject come from Old or New Testament, from classical literature, from the lives of the saints, Renaissance literature, everyday life?

Formal Analysis

- **technical means:** carved from stone (what kind?), wood? modeled in clay and then cast in bronze or glazed? welded metal? other?
- **volumes:** what kind of three-dimensional forms are basic to the sculpture: geometric (conic, cubic, pyramidal), irregular (jagged, smooth, organic)? how are these forms organized?
- **line:** does the work have an open or closed silhouette? are the dominant linear elements seen in the forms themselves, or are they incised onto the surfaces of the forms? what is the relationship between linear and volumetric elements?
- **space:** to what degree does the figure displace space? do the forms and space interpenetrate? is the piece a relief which creates the illusion of space within it? is the sculpture frontal? does it turn in space? was it meant to be seen from one point of view only, or from many?
- **color:** is color or gilding added to the sculpture? is the color of the material of special importance? does the color have a thematic significance? does it have a descriptive or expressive function?
- **light:** has the artist considered the effect of light upon his work? are the forms arranged so that a particular effect of light and shade will be attained?
- **material and form:** are some of the forms inherent to the carving or modeling process?

Iconographic Analysis

- is the subject treated the same way in several contemporary works?
- has a tradition been constant or varied over time?
- is the subject new or is the treatment of an old subject new?

Function

- was the work part of a larger decorative group?
- was it intended for public or private viewing?
- how might function have affected the form?

Content

- how do the subject, theme, and/or form convey ideas, values, sentiments, perceptions?
- what does the work of art say about the period and culture in which it was created?

ARCHITECTURE

Identification

- name of building? location?
- date built? (many buildings are built over a long period of time; what parts were built at what dates?)
- name of architect, if known?

Purpose

- temple, church, tomb, house, palace, meeting hall, office building?
- further distinctions: cathedral, chapel, etc.

Importance of the Building

- who uses the building?
- is the site important?

Structure

- what forms help hold the building up?
- what materials were used? were they easily available?
- how is the building lit?
- what is the size of the windows and doors in proportion to the structure as a whole?
- are they decorated?
- does the shape of the site affect the building?
- what is the form of the ceiling?
- are there columns? where, what kind? what is their function?
- is there sculpture on the building?
- how is exterior related to interior?
- are different sections of the building meant for different functions?

History and Geography

- are the forms of the building similar to those of other buildings?
- what elements reflect a local tradition?
- are traditional elements practical or customary?
- are forms related to foreign models?
- are forms related to older models? why?

Meaning

- what statement does the building make about human values, ideas, beliefs, sentiments?