



WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Writing about Art

Art is a provocative medium, and your challenge in writing about art may often be to define and evaluate the artist's choices and techniques, which arouse interest and convey meaning. In most cases, then, you will be translating the visual (what you see) into language (what you write). In order to do this, you will have to be extremely attentive to the characteristics of the work—which means that description will constitute a large portion of your essay—and be attentive to the vocabulary of the discipline.

You must also be able to develop a thesis statement with a detailed analysis and argument about the work or works of art you have chosen. Therefore, you must consider what it is you want to say, and use description to make that point. In many ways, writing an art history essay is similar to writing other types of essays in the humanities. It requires a clear and focused topic, an arguable thesis, an organized format and structure, clear and coherent paragraphs, and a command of grammar and style.

It is important to note that writing about art can encompass a broad range of media: i.e., painting, printmaking, drawing, sculpture, photography, architecture, video, film, ceramics, metal, glass; and within each medium there are subcategories. It also requires a general knowledge of specific vocabulary used within the field. Be reminded that the title of an artwork is italicized: e.g., Vincent van Gogh's *The Night Café* and Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (paintings); Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker* (sculpture); Edward Steichen's *Sunday Night on Fortieth Street, New York* (photograph).

TYPES OF WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Response or Analytical Essay

Writing about art is basically a process of interpretation, and a common assignment in beginning as well as advanced art history courses is to write a response or analytical essay pertaining to a specific work, either a painting or sculpture. This usually suggests that you begin your essay with a straightforward description of the work followed by a formal analysis. For a painting, your analysis would incorporate information concerning elements such as subject matter, frame and pictorial area, technique, composition, and function. Special consideration would be given to particular types of painting, i.e., portrait, figurative scene, landscape. Likewise, with a sculpture, your analysis would consist of a discussion pertaining to subject matter, material and form (i.e., line, space, color, light), iconographic analysis, function, and content.

The introductory section of your essay should include a thesis statement that clearly and concisely conveys the focus or main argument of your essay. Your response to the work and analysis of how the formal elements relate to the subject matter are developed in the body of your essay.

Asking questions helps to determine your thesis and to shape the content of your argument: What is the artist trying to say? What is your emotional and intellectual reaction to the work? What is the relationship of the formal elements in creating new and interesting ways of seeing and understanding the work in question as a whole?

It is important to note that a response or analytical essay can take several different forms of organization:

- A sociological essay examines the influence on an artist of belonging to a particular social group at a particular period in a particular society. This essay may also raise more general questions, such as difficulties facing female artists or artists of color.
- A biographical essay explores the relevance of an artist's life to her/his art (e.g., how Harry Callahan credits Ansel Adams with influencing his photographic career).
- An iconographic (literally, "image writing") essay investigates the symbols in a work of art. For example, art critic Sylvan Barnet points out that in Rembrandt's *The Assassin* the subjects of the painting appear to be Dutch citizens. However, a close examination of the painting's symbolism reveals that these figures might more accurately be identified as saints.

Comparison and Contrast Essay

Another common assignment in art history courses is to write a paper in which you compare and contrast two works of art. This type of essay usually requires a substantial comparative judgment of the two works, which will function as your thesis. One option for a thesis statement for this kind of comparative essay could be based on how you see the two works in relation to each other and to some aspect of the human condition, or culture, or history. It could be, for example, that both artists painted peasants working in a field, but one painting suggests the oneness of humans and nature, perhaps because the figures appear to be an integral part of the field in which they are working, while the other painting emphasizes the separation between humans and nature.

The evidence you provide for your thesis will include your interpretation, analysis, and description of the characteristics of both works, and must at all times relate to your thesis. For example, if you are discussing horizontality or verticality, you need to first accurately and clearly describe these elements in both works and then evaluate how these visual orientations demonstrate the validity of your thesis concerning humans as a part of nature or separate from it.

Unless the assignment specifies a work-by-work approach, it is usually best that you do not divide the paper into two discrete sections: a discussion of one work of art followed by a discussion of the other. Instead, each paragraph can include discussion of both works in relation to a particular element or a well thought-out combination of elements, such as color and texture. Remember that the point of comparison or contrast is that each paragraph must support the point of your paper, your thesis.

Documented Research Paper

Developing a Thesis Statement

Although the response and analytical essay as well as comparison and contrast essay may or may not require using secondary sources as part of the assignment, both strategies can be extended into a documented research paper. Most academic essays seek to persuade readers to understand a specific issue in a specific way—the writer’s way. The writer’s thesis statement offers this substantial but concise assertion of her/his understanding (usually in one to two sentences in the introduction or near the beginning of the essay), thereby providing an essay with its judgmental focus.

Perhaps, though, in writing about art you might be asked to offer a well thought-out central idea rather than an overtly argumentative statement. For example, “African art was a major influence on the work of Pablo Picasso” states a well-documented and widely shared opinion that is interesting but uncontroversial. Of course, a paper on this topic would have to fully elaborate on that relationship and offer examples of it.

The difference between an idea and a thesis statement is in their degree of contention. The above example of a central idea could be debatable, but mainly the disagreement would arise if the writer does not adequately explain and illustrate the idea through detailed description, intelligent criticism, and analysis, and not because of the idea itself.

However, in a thesis statement—such as, “Picasso’s treatment of women in his art mirrors the distorted vision he had of women in general”—it is more obvious that readers will either strongly disagree or agree, by the very nature of the claim itself. Moreover, even if the writer advances a stimulating argument with impressive evidence in defense of the thesis, because the claim is so contentious, a reader may still disagree.

Using Sources

A good research paper often includes evidence from both **primary** and **secondary sources**. Whether you are using primary or secondary sources, remember to explain and analyze the passages that you have chosen from the texts (or elements you have chosen from the works), and what those passages (or elements) mean in relation to your argument. You must also prepare your reader before using passages (direct or paraphrased) by providing at least a brief background.

- **Primary sources** refer to the original materials (not what another author says about them). In the case of art, primary sources will most likely be the art (paintings, sculptures, installations) itself, or interviews with artists.
- Interpreting and commenting on primary sources, **secondary sources** include books and articles in scholarly journals. These texts are extremely helpful as they deepen our knowledge of art and inform us of the many critical approaches to art that scholars and other specialists in the field have taken. Even though these sources are of great value, an art paper is usually not comprised entirely of secondary sources.

Documentation

You will be required to document all of your sources, including ideas, paraphrases, quotations, and references to a complete text. There are style manuals, such as the *MLA Handbook (Modern Language Association)* 8th Edition, and *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th Edition, that provide guidelines for documentation, but each academic discipline has its own preference. Always check with your instructor to find out which style is preferred.

Sample MLA Citations for Visual Arts

To cite a painting, lithograph, sculpture, photograph, or similar work, provide the artist's name first (when available), the title of the artwork in italics, the year of composition (if the year is unknown, write "N.d."), the medium of the artwork, and the name and location of the institution that houses the artwork, or, for a work in a private collection, give the name of the collection (Collection of ...). Note: If the collector is unknown, use "Private collection" without a city name.

Painting

Basquiat, Jean-Michel. *Self-Portrait*. 1982. Acrylic, oil paintstick, and spray paint on canvas. Collection of Bo Franzen.

Katz, Alex. *Red Coat*. 1982. Oil on canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Picasso, Pablo. *The Dream*. 1932. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

Sculpture

Bernini, Gian Lorenzo. *David*. 1623–24. Marble. Galleria Borghese, Rome, Italy.

Photograph

Steichen, Edward J. *The Flatiron*. 1904. Gum bichromate over platinum print. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Note: For a museum label, plaque, or other wall text, cite the following: location of artwork; form (label or plaque); title of the artwork; location of gallery/museum (city, state, country).

National Portrait Gallery. Museum label for Berenice Abbott, *James Joyce*. London, England.

For additional information, consult the RWC handout "Writing about Art: Asking Questions." The handout is divided into three categories—painting, sculpture, and architecture—and provides a list of questions for each medium designed to help identify information that could be useful in formulating your response and in preparing your analysis and evaluation.