



WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Guidelines for Writing about Art

The most common meaning of criticism is “finding fault,” and to be critical is to be censorious. But a critic can see excellences as well as faults. We turn to criticism with the hope that the critic has seen something we have missed, and the most valuable criticism is not that which shakes its finger at faults but that which calls our attention to interesting matters going on in the work of art.

Analytic Thinking: Form and Content

An analysis is, literally, a separating into parts in order to understand the whole. When you analyze, you are seeking to account for your experience of the artwork. Analysis thus includes synthesis, the combination of the parts into the whole.

In order to get at the content or meanings of a work we have to interpret the subject matter, the material and the form (size, shape, texture, and the like), the sociohistoric content, and (if known) perhaps the artist’s intentions. We also have to recognize that our own sociohistoric context—including our gender, economic background, political convictions, and so forth—will to some degree determine the meanings we see in a work.

Formal Analysis versus Description

A description is an impersonal inventory, dealing with the relatively obvious, reporting what any eye might see. It can also comment on the execution of the work (i.e., “thick strokes of paint,” “a highly polished surface”), but it does not evaluate. In contrast, a formal analysis is an analysis of the form the artist produces: that is, an analysis of the work of art, which is made up of such things as indicated above (size, shape, and texture as well as line, shape, color, mass, and composition)—the things that give a particular medium (i.e., a canvas) its form, its expression, its content. Formal analysis assumes a work of art is (1) a constructed object (2) with a stable meaning (3) that can be ascertained by studying the relationships between the elements of the work.

Analysis frequently involves comparing: things are examined for their resemblances to and differences from other things. Comparison is often used to discuss authenticity (i.e., when an artwork of uncertain attribution is closely compared with undoubtedly genuine works for purposes of identification). Comparisons are also commonly used in dating a work, and thus in tracing the history of an artistic movement or the development of an artist’s career.

Checklist for Writing a Comparison

- Is the point of the comparison clear?
- Are all significant similarities and differences covered?
- Is the organization clear?
- If a value judgement is offered, is it supported by evidence?

Research Techniques: From Subject to Thesis

Although a research paper requires its writer to collect the available evidence—usually including the opinions of earlier investigators—it is similar to a critical essay in being largely personal because the author continuously uses her or his own judgment to evaluate the evidence, deciding what is relevant and convincing. In essence, a research paper is a thoughtful evaluation of the available evidence and an expression of the author's assessment of the evidence.

In choosing a subject for your paper, keep in mind two limitations. First, materials for research on recent works may be extremely difficult to obtain, since crucial documents may not yet be in print or otherwise inaccessible. Second, materials might only be available in foreign language publications. Preliminary research should confirm whether the general subject of your paper can produce a topic that will be appropriate, relevant, and engaging. The exact focus of your research will determine the thesis of your paper.

Drafting and Revising

- Preliminary research: collect and review your notes (e.g., note cards)
- Arrange your notes into a first outline
- Organize your outline into a first draft
- Incorporate your quotations, even in the first draft, exactly as you want them to appear in the final version
- Include, in the body of the draft, all of the relevant citations
- Identify works of art as precisely as possible
- Beware the compulsion to include all your notes in your paper
- Do not let your paper become a string of quotations
- When you introduce a quotation, let the reader see its purpose and connection
- Introduce your thesis early in your paper
- Prepare a final version that will be easy to read

Checklist for Revising a Draft

- Exactly what topic are you examining, and exactly what thesis are you arguing?
- Does the paper fulfill all the promises that it makes or implies?
- Do the early paragraphs give the reader a fairly good idea of what will follow?
- Is evidence offered to support arguable assertions?
- Has all irrelevant material been deleted?
- Are quotations introduced appropriately? are they instructive? are they necessary or could summaries of longer quotations be more effective than the quotations themselves?
- Are all sources properly cited?
- Is the organization clear, reasonable, and effective?
- Is the final section an unnecessary restatement of the obvious or an effective ending to the paper?
- Is the title interesting and informative? Does it create a favorable first impression?