

Writing an Art History Paper

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Writing about art is based on the same analytical principles used for literature or history, but it requires a different approach and different observational skills. In an art history paper, we must employ a visual vocabulary and translate our visual impressions into a concrete verbal articulation. While this kind of writing can take many forms, the ultimate goals of any art history paper should be to explain the relationship between the technical form of a work and its impression on the viewer and to articulate how the visual elements work together to convey an overall effect.

There are several basic ways to write about art:

I. Formal Analysis:

A formal analysis is the fundamental form of writing about art and often the first taught in any introductory art history course. In a strict formal analysis, no other information is required besides that which you can see, and while some knowledge of the subject matter helps, your focus should be on the visual elements of a work. A formal analysis focuses on aspects like line, color, composition, and style, and describes the effect of these artistic decisions on the viewer. While any formal analysis must employ a good deal of description, it is important to remember that even a pure formal analysis must always be **thesis-driven** and each point should tie back to the overall interpretation of the work.

Example of a short formal analysis:

In Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin*, the artist uses **one point perspective, balanced composition, and vibrant primary colors to convey a sense of stability and order, thus representing the Christian narrative in the idealized, harmonious aesthetics of the Renaissance.** In the foreground, a man and woman stand on either side of a central figure, their adjoining hands creating a focal point which extends back to the doorway on the horizon line. The orthogonal lines created by the tiled pavement move the viewer's eye along the same central path and emphasize the perfect perspective of the scene. The deep hues of yellow and green in the central man's clothing complement the red and blue in the woman's, and form the palette for the rest of the onlookers, a simple, pure combination of colors that contributes to the sense of order. The almost perfect symmetry of the scene, as well as the relatively empty middle ground, underscore both the spiritual theme and the aesthetic values of the time.



Note how the writer balances description of the work, using a vocabulary based on knowledge of artistic techniques and visual elements, with analysis of their effect on the viewer. The thesis (in bold) provides a framework for the rest of the paragraph and acts as the driving force behind the descriptive observations.

The example above merely demonstrates the *type* of writing typically employed in a formal analysis and is therefore shorter and less thorough than most visual analyses. Also note that while the writer acknowledges the subject of the piece (the Christian account of the marriage of the Virgin Mary) and its time period (the Renaissance), most of the focus is kept on the visual elements themselves. If the writer were to include more information *beyond* the observable aspects of the scene, this would become more of a **research paper**.

For more information and a longer example of formal analysis, see pages 119-123 of Sylvan Barnet's *Writing About Art* (8th ed.).

II. Research Paper

An art history research paper can take a variety of forms, depending on the intended audience of the work and the aims of the writer. An **iconographic** analysis focuses on the representative **iconography** of a work, taking into account the symbolic role of images, the historical or mythological identity of figures, and any other elements that may have a visual significance.

Research papers may also focus on the **biographical** details of the artist, such as the story of Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel, or the connection between Van Gogh's *Starry Night* and the artist's mental health. They may also take into account such factors as **patronage** and **social context** and use these to place the work within a historical framework. In all cases, it is important to balance background research with analysis that ties these facts back to the work itself. In many cases, you will rely on the principles of formal analysis to back up some of your claims.

Example of an iconographic analysis:

One can apply a variety of iconographic interpretations to Jan Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding*. Erwin Panofsky, a prominent art historian in the first half of the twentieth century and one of the foremost proponents of iconography, attributed symbolic meaning to the various elements of the scene; he ultimately viewed the painting as a legal document of a marital union between Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife in 1434. In Panofsky's opinion, the single candle in the chandelier represents the presence of an all-seeing God witnessing the ceremony. The dog at the couple's feet represents fidelity; the wooden carving of St. Margaret at the top of the bedpost, protection for expecting mothers; and the bedroom setting for the scene underscores the intimacy of the ceremony. Finally, the artist's signature above the mirror constitutes the central focal point of the scene and documents the artist's presence as a witness in the ceremony. Not only do these elements work in a symbolic manner; it is the very nature of their symbolism that gives the work its nuptial significance.



The example above relies on Panofsky's interpretation of the scene, citing specific iconographical details in order to support the writer's conclusion. Research papers are

usually thesis-driven as well, and always directed at a specific audience (more on this in Section IV).

For more information on writing about iconography and doing art historical research, refer to pages 240-245 of *Writing About Art* (8th ed.), and the entirety of Chapter 11.

III. Comparative Analysis

Comparisons of two works of art are often used in both research papers and exam responses. They provide an opportunity to combine formal analysis with knowledge of the artists, the subjects, and relevant background information needed to make inferences about the relationship between the two works. Begin by asking yourself what aspects of the two works stand out as particularly notable and whether or not these attributes are shared. A comparison typically starts with similarities; if the two works share a stylistic background, have the same artist or relative period, or depict the same subject, mention the commonality as grounds for establishing a comparison. Then, move on to the ways in which the two works differ, beginning with the obvious and moving on to the more subtle and specific. Conclude each point by analyzing what this difference might reveal.

Example of a comparison:



Assignment: Compare the Donatello's *David* with Michelangelo's version of the same subject. How does the difference between these two indicate the stylistic difference between their two respective periods?

Donatello's and Michelangelo's *Davids* share the same biblical subject, historical period, and sculptural form, yet differ in a number of significant ways that reflect their respective embodiments of the early and high Renaissance styles. The most apparent difference between the two is the moment in the battle that each artist chooses to depict. Donatello's *David* stands victoriously above the head of his vanquished foe, his own head bowed in an almost feminine gesture of reflection, a picture of the idealized male nude. Michelangelo, on the other hand, has caught his *David* in the moments before the battle itself. He stands proudly in a position of perfect contrapposto, his hand holding the sling, the only iconographic reference in the entire piece, over one shoulder, looking into the distance with a pensive, almost fearful gaze. This *David* is no longer a shy, pretty vision of youth, but a man on the verge of adulthood, an

embodiment of the Florentine identity and the full realization of the artistic ability of the high Renaissance that Michelangelo came to represent.

This is a shortened example; a full version would cover more points of comparison and go into greater depths of analysis. As with the formal analysis, description should never take precedence over analysis, and the writing should always pursue a thesis.

For a sample comparison, see pages 142-149 of *Writing About Art* (8th ed.).

IV. Further Advice

- Always keep in mind the **audience** of your work. An article in a newspaper differs substantially from a purely academic analysis, assuming a more casual tone and appealing to a more general audience. This, in turn, is different from an exhibition review. Keeping these different voices distinct when you write about art will help make your writing interesting and alive. While art history has no **default audience**, and you should always check whether the assignment specifies an intended reader, it is usually safe to assume you are writing for a classmate, and not only your professor.
- When describing works of art, write in the present **tense**. While references to the life of the artist and the historical period surrounding the work should generally be in the past, formal analyses should always be in the present, as should as any descriptions of the works themselves.
- **Trust your eyes.** If a work elicits a certain reaction, there is almost always a reason for this response. Learn to articulate your instincts in a way that helps your audience understand more about the work and its intended function.
- Ask **why** an artist made a specific decision, and then try to imagine how it could have been otherwise. Why is a dress painted red rather than blue? Why choose marble for a medium, if bronze is lighter and less costly? These questions help to place you in the mindset of the artist and gain further insight into the work itself.
- Finally, remember that your task is to translate something that is inherently visual into a verbal form. At times, this can seem rather daunting, and even counterintuitive. Keeping this distinction in mind as you begin to write about art will help to make your task easier and ultimately illuminate the best aspects of both forms of expression.

Works Referenced:

Panofsky, Erwin. "Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait." *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 372, no. 64 (1934): 117-119+122-127. JSTOR. [Database online.]

Barnet, Sylvan. *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*. Eighth Edition. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008.

For more information on style, constructing a thesis, and introductions and conclusions, see the *Writing Center* handouts on each of these topics.

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