

HUNTER COLLEGE WRITING CENTER

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, according to your intellect and perception, 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 incorporate a large portion of your essay—and be attentive to the vocabulary of the discipline of Art. You must also be able to develop a thesis statement with a detailed analysis and argument about the artwork 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.

Comparison and Contrast

In many beginning Art History courses, and in more advanced ones as well, you will be asked to write a paper in which you make a comparison and contrast between two works of art (for more information about writing this type of paper, see the Writing Center handout on [Comparison and Contrast](#)). This type of essay usually requires a substantial comparative judgment of the two works, which will function as your thesis (for more information on developing a thesis statement, see the Writing Center handout [Developing a Thesis Statement](#) and see the section on thesis below).

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 (for more information on Organization, see the Writing Center Handout [Paragraph Organization](#)). The point of comparison or contrast that each paragraph makes must, remember, support the point of your paper, your thesis.

Research Paper

For information and online access to Writing Center handouts on Writing a Research Paper, Writing a Summary, Developing a Thesis Statement, or Documentation Styles, simply click on any of these headings or go to the Writing Center Handouts section of the Hunter Reading Writing Center website at <http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu>. Of course, you are always welcome to visit the Writing Center at Thomas Hunter 416, to pick up handouts and to work with a tutor.

Keep in mind that this handout is a guideline. Check with your instructor on any questions you may have concerning your assignment.

Thesis Statement

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 (see the Writing Center Handout on Developing a Thesis Statement).

Perhaps, though, in writing about art you might want 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

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.

Secondary Sources

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 (The Modern Language Association) Handbook* and *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 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 (see the Writing Center handouts on Quotation, Paraphrase, and Plagiarism, MLA Documentation Style, and Chicago Manual Documentation Style).

Kinds of Art History Papers

Formal Analysis

Considers the formal parts (e.g., framing, symmetry, perspective, etc.) of a work of art and their relationship to create new and interesting ways of seeing and understanding the work in question as a whole.

The 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, artists of color, etc.

The Biographical Essay

Explores the relevance of an artist's life to her/his art. For example, a biographical essay could detail how Harry Callahan credits Ansel Adams with influencing his photographic career.

Iconography (literally, "image writing")

Investigates the symbols in a work of art. For example, Barnett 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.

[The following questions have been adapted from a guide written by J.S. Held, Professor Emeritus, Barnard College.]

Painting

1. **Identification**
--Who is the artist?

- What is the subject or title?
- Where and when was the work painted?

2. **Subject Matter**

- What type of painting is it?
 - a. religious
 - b. historical
 - c. allegorical
 - d. genre (scene of everyday life)
 - e. still life
 - f. portrait
 - g. landscape
 - h. architectural view
- If the painting seems to belong to two categories, does one dominate?

3. **Frame and Pictorial Area**

- What is the actual size of the picture (height precedes width)?
- What is the proportion of height to width?
- What is the relationship of the shapes to the frame? Are they harmonious or discordant?
- Does the frame cut the shapes?

4. **Technique**

- What materials are used for support: wood, canvas, cardboard, paper?
- What kinds of colors are used: oil, tempura, watercolor, pastel?
- 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 clear or obscure? Angular or curved?
- 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?

5. **Function**

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

Considerations for Different Types of Subject Matter

1. **Portraits**

- How much of the figure is shown?
- 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, etc.)?
- 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?

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 her/him or to the model, or to their time.

2. **Figural 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 or outdoors)?
- What role does the setting play?

3. **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 are their thematic and spatial relationships to the site?
- What is the proportion of cloud to sky? Plane to elevation? Water to land?

--What is the general character of the scene: attractive, forbidding, calm, turbulent, spectacular, intimate? What elements determine the effect: lighting, color scheme, spatial organization?

4. **General Observations**

- Does the work seem spontaneous or calculated?
- How do the formal elements convey theme, mood, visual interest?
- What was the original function of the picture? Was it done for a public or private place?
- Is it possible to make a reasoned statement about the artist's aim? Does the artist wish to elevate the spirit, instruct, moralize, entertain, or satisfy her/his own need for expression?

Sculpture

1. **Identification**

- What is the title or subject?
- When and where was it made?
- What medium was used?

2. **Subject Matter**

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

3. **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: 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 that 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?

4. **Iconographic Analysis**

- Is the subject treated the same way in several contemporary works?

- Is the figure or pose traditional? Has the tradition been constant or varied over time?
- Is the subject new or is there a new treatment of an old subject?

5. **Function**

- Was the work part of a larger decorative program, such as a facade?
- Was it intended for public or private viewing?
- How might function have affected the form?

6. **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

1. **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?

2. **Purpose**

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

3. **Importance of the Building**

- Who uses the building?
- Is the site important?

4. **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?
- 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?

5. **History and Geography**

- Are the forms of the building similar to those of other buildings?
- What elements reflect local tradition?
- Are traditional elements practical or customary?

- Are forms related to foreign models? Why?
- Are forms related to older, historical models? Why?

6. **Meaning**

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

For information on finding sources, visit the following websites:

The Art History Research Center

<http://www-fofa.concordia.ca/arth/AHRC/index.htm>

Art History Resources on the Web

<http://witcombe.sbc.edu/ARTHLinks.html>