

ART110 - DUE MON FEB 22 - NAME \_\_\_\_\_  
COMPONENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE “FORMAL ANALYSIS” ESSAY  
Katsushika Hokusai, *The Great Wave off Kanazawa*

1 - READ ESSAY AND IGNORE YELLOW 2 - READ AGAIN AND INCLUDE YELLOW

DIRECTLY FROM ESSAY:

- 1 - In the artwork the process of woodblock printing results in ...
- 2 - How is the artwork image related to the time and place of its origin...
- 3 - Rewrite one sentence you find interesting and insightful...

DIRECTLY FROM YELLOW HIGHLIGHTS:

- 1 - Before beginning a formal analysis essay it is important to ...
- 2 - The more time you spend looking at a work, the more ...
- 3 - An introductory paragraph clearly ...

To enrich your introductory paragraph, and consequently your essay as a whole, a larger or unified theme can put your formal analysis into some larger observation, thesis, or argument.

- 4 - In this essay, the author observes that Hokusai’s work presents is an interaction of humans with... .”
- 5 - Formal analysis describes what the work in terms of...
- 6 - A “descriptive basis” provides the essential \_\_\_\_\_ on which the author can then \_\_\_\_\_ what the artist has produced. - the process of “finding the meaning” and “making sense” of what is literally present in the work of art.

- 7 - A concluding paragraph can review major points of the essay but can also take what has been discussed and uses it to suggest \_\_\_\_\_

## Formal Analysis Essay

Katsushika Hokusai, *The Great Wave off Kanazawa*, 1823-39. Polychrome woodblock print, 10 x 14 ins (25.5 X 37.5 cm). Victoria & Albert Museum, London

*Before beginning your formal analysis essay it is important to spend an extended period observing and taking careful notes about the work of art in question. It is additionally recommended that you come back to your work several times and go through a similar process of observing and note taking. The more time you spend looking at a work, the more you will be able to observe and understand its formal composition and the artistic choices that the artist made.*

Katsushika Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanazawa* presents an image of the sea and the interaction of humans with that great and expansive natural environment. It is not, however, an image produced with the intent of presenting the sea or those who float upon it in realistic terms. Rather, Hokusai's print is the product of an artist whose intent was to translate and communicate the essence of the sea and the tenuousness of human interaction with it through artistic and dramatic means. Hokusai accomplished this by applying principles of design, the manipulation of color, and the exploitation of his medium of the woodblock print on two-dimensional paper as a way of filtering what he saw in nature and knew to be true of human nature into a concerted artistic vision of a great and all-powerful wave.

*It is important to begin your formal analysis essay with an introductory paragraph that clearly indicates the work that is going to be analyzed. Additionally, it is recommended that you enliven your introductory paragraph, and consequently your essay as a whole, with a general theme that places your formal analysis into some larger point or argument. In this essay, the author provides, by way of this larger theme, the observation that Hokusai's work presents an image of the sea and the interaction of humans with "that great and expansive natural environment."*

Hokusai's print is conventionally called *The Great Wave off Kanazawa*, and a wave of substantial size is definitely the predominant, though not exclusive, visual element in the composition. Near the center of the piece there is a mountain projection in

the distance, clearly identifiable as Mt. Fuji. Floating upon the wave are two long and narrow wooden boats, each of which is manned by several diminutive, faceless figures who struggle against the ferocity of nature all around them. These boats, in their slightly crescent and slicing shapes, echo and nearly become lost in the more dominant though corresponding crescent and slicing shapes of the waves in their midst. Above this scene of tossed boats and surging water is an expanse of mottled, yellowish paper, suggestive of a seamlessly cloud-filled sky. This sky is only articulated and interrupted by a set of Japanese characters in the upper left-hand corner of the composition. Despite the presence of these other visual elements, what clearly communicates that the wave, exaggerated and featured prominently in the print, was Hokusai's predominant interest is the fact that something so ephemeral as surging water dominates the composition even to the visual expense and weight of an obviously monumental Mt. Fuji.

*In this paragraph the author sets the stage for a formal analysis simply by describing what the work presents in terms of visual elements and their organization. Note that this paragraph is almost entirely descriptive rather than analytical in nature. This descriptive basis provides the essential foundation on which the author will then analyze what the artist has produced.*

The visual and expressive elements in Hokusai's composition are not of equal weight, and this was clearly the intention of the artist. Occupying approximately fifty percent of the page, and defining with its form the corresponding negative space of the sky, the wave of abundant cold blue water and frigid, stylized white and lighter blue frothy accents at its edges surges high into the sky and nearly extends to the full vertical extent of the paper. It then curls over and begins to make its way back to the body of the sea. So dominant is the wave visually that it both dwarfs and nearly hides from view the sliver-like forms of the two boats that are perilously tossed in the water just below its

upward arching form. Furthermore, so impressive and all-consuming is the wave in the visual field that we even question whether the land form in the distance is actually a land form or another wave. This ambiguity is compounded by a spatial uncertainty of the whole composition that is the result of the flat expanse of the sky/background and the further flattening of the surface and denial of perspective effect by the presence of the Japanese characters that are clearly on the surface of the print rather than set deep within any imaginary space. What animates this composition is the frozen ambiguity between the wave and the sky, which leaves the viewer feeling that within an instant the sea will shift and begin the whole volatile process over again.

*In this paragraph the author begins the process of analyzing and making sense of the more matter-of-fact observations of the previous paragraph of what is literally present in the work of art.*

In part the simplification and stylization of forms and elements in Hokusai's work are the result of certain limitations of woodblock printing. The medium accommodates general rather than specific delineation of forms, and the use of three-color printing creates a more decorative than detailed description of those forms. Yet however related to the woodblock medium are Hokusai's simplification and stylization of natural forms, such generalization and abstraction of nature are also in line with a dominant Japanese aesthetic sensibility that finds a kindred echo in other works from that culture. In this regard, Hokusai's stylized representation of the sea is similar to how Japanese screen painters represent nature in abstract terms or how Japanese garden designers make similarly abstract little worlds from the careful arrangements of rocks, plants, and open spaces between them.

*In this paragraph the author further explains the choices the artist made in relation to (1) limitations and qualities of the medium itself; and (3) certain stylistic proclivities of Japanese art and design in general.*

There is also something inherently Japanese in the artistic decisions that resulted in Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanazawa*. The sea surrounds Japan and must always have been ever-present in Japanese life, sustaining that life for the most part but also challenging and, on occasion, taking it. It is entirely possible, then, that in Hokusai's hands the great surging wave—at once abstractly beautiful and realistically menacing—represents both an artistic decision and a cultural statement.

*Note that while this is a concluding paragraph, the conclusion is not merely a repetition of the major points of the essay but instead a conclusion that takes what has been discussed and uses it to suggest that the artistic choices of Hokusai may well have deep cultural roots in Japanese society.*