

# Art and Art History

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## An Overview

Writing for Art and Art History is most often critical analysis. Papers generally follow the traditional format for an analytical essay: intro with thesis, body paragraphs in support of the thesis, and a conclusion. Include a topic sentence for each paragraph, and keep your thoughts clear and concise. The writing should state its intention, and then work slowly to prove said intention to the reader. Since this writing is critical analysis, all claims should be supported by evidence.

There are several different types of writing in Art and Art History. Formal analysis is a study of the principles and elements of art. Stylistic analysis is a study of the art object in the context of the stylistic period in which it was created. Patronage analysis explores the effects of a patron on an art object, as well as that object's personal history. Iconographic analysis is the study of the content of the images and their symbolic associations. Theoretical analysis/criticism looks into social and historical contexts of the piece and their implications for interpretation.

Avoid sweeping generalizations and *assuming* authority on the topic. For example, instead of saying “the Laocoon is an amazing and awe-inspiring masterpiece in the time period,” say, “the Laocoon’s command of form, use of dramatic movement and strong diagonal form makes it a masterpiece of its time period.” Pay close attention to the definitions of the elements and principles of art. These terms and their definitions can be the building blocks for your critical essay, adding a level of sophistication and understanding when used properly. Be aware of subtle differences in meaning, which can often lead to their misuse (e.g. color and value, or shape and form. Read and reread the definitions before including them in your writing!

## Forms of Analysis

There are several types of analysis in both art and art history writing. Formal analysis is used predominately in writing for studio classes. Stylistic, patronage, and iconographic analyses are used predominately in writing for art history classes. Theoretical analysis is used in both of these disciplines. Below is a brief description of all of the styles, along with some tips and tricks for the writing process.

### **Formal Analysis:**

Formal analysis breaks down the use of the **Elements of Art** (see terms below—line, shape, space, value, color and texture) and the **Principles of Art** (see terms below—unity, harmony, balance, rhythm, contrast, dominance, gradation). It looks closely also at composition and the Attributes of Art (emotional, esthetic, spatial). It is an in-detail description of how each of the

elements and principles are used in the art object. This type of writing is often inductive. This means that you will begin with a detailed description of the art object, using the **critical terms** (see terms below) and eventually conclude with what makes this piece a successful or unsuccessful one. In Art, this type of writing is typically used for peer or personal review. In Art History, this is most often used as a means of analysis for more well-known works. Formal analysis is all about transferring visual language into written language, one of the skills required of art historians; think of this as an exercise in communication.

### **Stylistic Analysis:**

Stylistic analysis discusses an object in the context of its stylistic period (i.e. Renaissance, Hellenistic, Modern). Most often this will be a comparison of two objects from similar or different time periods. Focus on the characteristics of the established time period: How does this art object fit into its established time period? How does it differ from contemporary art objects? What was going on during the time it was created? How was it received by the public? This type of paper allows for a look at broader historical and social contexts as opposed to only the art object itself. If the art piece differs from the norm of the time, explore why and look into how this piece could have improved the science of its contemporaries. This is a look into larger historical trends.

### **Patronage Analysis:**

Patronage analysis is an examination of the experience of an art object. Look at the influence of a patron (the one who purchases the art) and what this says about the life of the artist during this time period. In what time period/movement was the art object created? What was the intention of the art object (personal, public, religious)? Track the history of an object before it came to a museum, and its significance in history. Do not neglect the effect of the patron's status, religion, or political stance on the piece.

### **Iconographic Analysis:**

This is a study of the content of images and symbols, as understood by art historians. These images are often religiously based but can also be culturally based. Look at this in a broader social context of the time. Do not be afraid to compare the imagery to that used in objects with like subjects. What is the intention behind the symbols? How is this influenced by the patron? What is the context of the piece? What does the setting say about the objects themselves? Look into the history of those things which the objects represent. Does an understanding of the icons provide new meaning to and/or understanding of the piece?

### **Theoretical Analysis and Criticism:**

This type of analysis is not about the art object itself but instead about its social and historical circumstance. Consider what this piece is saying about the social, economic, religious, gender and/or cultural contexts at the time. Explore these topics, using critical theory as a framework for the analysis. There are many art theorists. Read up on the literature surrounding the piece and its time. Is there further intention than aesthetics? If there is no further intention, what does that say about the piece? Consider the applied ontology (how the medium is used with a specific intention i.e. painting a portrait) of the medium versus the physical ontology (the study of what the medium is and what it does i.e. acrylic paint is powder pigment suspended in water based medium, which later dries like plastic).

## List of Critical Terms

One of the most difficult parts about writing in art and art history is commanding the language. Many of the terms have extremely specific and intertwined definitions. Therefore, using the correct terminology is important to building an accurate analysis of any piece. Below is a list of critical terms to get you started. The Elements and Principles of Art are the building blocks of any critique or analysis in art. Be sure to pay close attention to the subtle differences in each definition. If you are stuck on where to begin, try looking at the subject of your paper and describe it using the Elements and Principles of Art.

### Elements of Art:

- Line - Lines define the edges of objects in art pieces. Take note of their shape and thickness.
- Shape - Shapes are formed from the meeting of lines and the enclosing of areas in two-dimensional space.
- Form - Form is the three-dimensional partner to shape. Essentially it is shape with value in order to give it a third dimension. (The art object does not need to be three-dimensional in order for form to be discussed.)
- Space - Space is an empty place or surface in or around a work of art. Space can be two-dimensional, three-dimensional, negative and/or positive. Negative space is the space which no object is occupying (e.g. a blank background in a photograph). Positive space is the space that an object occupies (e.g. the space an apple occupies on your counter).
- Color - Color refers to the hue and intensity of the colors of the art object. It may also refer to the value, or the darkness, or the color. Note that tint and saturation are also to be considered. **Hue** is the name of the color on the color wheel. **Value** is the lightness or darkness of the color present, how black or white it is. And **Intensity** is the brightness or dullness of a color.
- Value – The lightness or darkness of the color. Value is often used to denote form and space.
- Texture – The use of, or illusion of, different textures, such as metal, wood, or fabric, in an art object.

### Principles of Art:

- Rhythm – This is the creation of visual rhythm by repeating specific elements throughout a piece, even using patterns.
- Movement – This is the flow through a composition. Look to lines and contrast in the piece. Focus on how the viewer reads the visual aspects of the art object.
- Pattern – The repetition of a line, shape or color over and over again.
- Balance – This can be symmetrical or radial. It is created through visual weight in the piece. Balance can be both formal and informal.
- Variety – Often used to draw your eye to a focal point, variety is created by something that differs from the rest of the composition.

- Emphasis – This is used to make certain parts of the artwork stand out. This can be done with techniques with line, value, shape, and pattern. This can also be interpreted as a focal point.
- Harmony – Brings together a composition through similar elements.
- Unity – How all of the parts of a piece function together to create a whole.

## **Getting Started**

This section will be coming in the future.

## **Sample Papers**

This section will be coming in the future.

## **Citation Style**

Although there is no standard for citation in art and art history writing, Chicago style is most commonly used. So why cite sources? When utilizing or referencing anyone else's intellectual material, proper citations are the best way to avoid plagiarism. Intellectual material should be accredited to its original thinker. Keep in mind that not everything needs to be cited during this process. If something is considered general knowledge to the audience to whom you are writing (Leonardo Da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa), the information does not need to be cited. If the information is a more specific claim that supports your argument (such as the Mona Lisa is said to be a portrait of Lisa Gherardini), it needs to be properly cited. Chicago style can either be done in footnotes or with in-text citations and a bibliography.

### **The format for footnotes or endnotes**

1. Contributors' Name, "Title of Resource," *Publishing Organization/ Web Site Name in Italics*, last edited date, website.

### **Bibliography**

Name, Contributor 1, Contributor 2 Name, and Contributor 3. "Title of Resource" *Publishing Organization/ Website*. Last Edited Date.

### **In-text Citation**

(Contributors' Surnames, year of publication, page or section number when available)

There is additional information for how to properly cite sources available on the following websites. Keep in mind that if you use sites that automatically cite information for you, such as EasyBib or Zotero, this information is not always guaranteed to be correctly formatted. Always make sure to double check these sources before submitting your bibliography.

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<http://library.uvm.edu/guides/citation/chicago.php>

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<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/717/02/>