



NO. 51 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

Describing Art: Writing a Formal Analysis

“Wow, isn’t that pretty” isn’t going to cut it anymore. How can you turn the visual into the verbal in a formal analysis?

What is a formal analysis?

A formal analysis is more than just a description of a work of art. It is an argument based on your own visual evidence that takes a stance and creates an interesting discussion from the formal elements of the work.

How is a formal analysis different from other writing?

- A formal analysis presents the difficult challenge of translating the visual, what you observe in the art, into the verbal, what you actually write.
- Not only do you have to describe the work, but you also have to use your description to support your argument. You are therefore simultaneously analyzing and describing the work.
- All of your evidence and analysis will come from the formal elements of the work.

Prewriting.

- Take a pad and pencil to record your thoughts on the piece you choose to analyze as they occur.
- Take time to carefully choose the work you will analyze — choose a work that speaks both emotionally and intellectually.
- Record your initial response to the work you have chosen.
- Focus above all on the formal elements of the work, including **line, medium, color, light, space, composition, and style**. What feeling do they give to the viewer and what are their relationships to the rest of the work as a whole? More information on these elements can be found in the texts listed at the bottom of this page.
- Consider the context of the work: artist, time, historical background, location.
- Review all of your notes to develop an argument. Try to make connections between the formal issues and the broader concepts of context and personal response to develop this argument.

Writing.

- The conventions for a formal analysis for a work of art is similar to other writing in the humanities. You should have a thesis statement and structured paragraphs, and you should adhere to general rules of grammar and style.
- Remember that you are not simply describing the work; rather, you are using your descriptions of the work to reinforce your thesis.
- Avoid using the first person since your arguments should develop from the formal elements, not your personal response.

Avoid: *I was disturbed by the painting.*

Better: *The sharp, heavy lines outlining the figures and the dark blues which dominate the sky in the background give the painting an ominous and disturbing feeling.*

For more information about writing art reviews, see
A Short Guide To Writing About Art, Sylvan Barnet
ARTiculating: Teaching Writing in a Visual World, Pamela B. Childer,
Eric H. Hobson, and Joan A. Mullin
Writing About Art, Henry M. Sayre