Visual Analysis of Art

Visual analysis is the art of looking closely. It helps us to understand how visual material communicates, whether it creates functional, intellectual or emotion meaning, or something else. Analysis can generally be undertaken on any visual medium including 2D and 3D artworks, design, and architecture. Academic writing in the creative arts is about building an argument based on visual evidence using what you see in an artwork, or installation, together with literature on concepts, or movements you identify as being relevant to it. This is important in creative practice because the process of examining elements of art provides a framework with which to consider your own work.

Three steps to analyse art

Analysing a work of art involves more than describing what you see. Your writing needs to do three things: examine the artwork itself in detail; consider the ways the artist conveys meaning; and situate the work in its social and historical context. Turn the page for prompts on each step.

1. Examine the artwork

Identify and describe what you see:

- Name the kind of art you are analysing: a painting, lino print, sculpture, etc.
- Give the title and artist, the year, its dimensions, and material.
- Describe elements such as colour, texture, shape, and line.
- Consider the composition including any relational aspects, like repetition, space, or scale.
- Notice any response you have to it, for example, if you feel tension, movement, illusion, harmony, space, positive or negative energy, or emotion.

Describing the art is not yet an analysis! Discussion about how particular compositional aspects convey feelings, for example, is part of your evaluation of the artwork (step three). With your examination completed, continue with step two.

2. Situate the artwork in context

Its context conveys important information. With it you can better grasp the practices in which the artists or designers were embedded, including historical methods and limitations that may have been acting upon their work. Context includes how the artist developed an idea, devised their work, and overcame problems. Context is also reflected in their access to materials and technologies and how they operated within (or despite) it. How an artist marketed their work provides context too, as it reflects both their culture and their personal way of seeing.

- Identify the context/s most relevant to your task. For example, what historical, political, economic, social, geographical or other context will you consider?
- Research any relevant art movements, starting with readings provided in your unit material.
- Identify visual characteristics of your selected artwork that reflect the art movement
- Consider relationships between your artwork and the context in question.

3. Interpret/Analyse the artwork

Your analysis incorporates a summary of the artwork's subject matter, or story, along with your interpretation of the material and understanding of the environment in which it was created.

- Summarise its subject matter, which may include how it was created, or used.
- Reflect on your response to the material and what associations are created by it.
- Interpret the material, drawing on aspects you identified in step one to ascribe meaning to it.
- Consider aspects relating to the material that you gained from other sources such as scholarly texts, and how they illuminate your understanding of the artwork.

More than just describing an artwork, a visual analysis draws links between artistic material and its social, political, and/or historical context by evaluating and bringing together ideas to communicate meaning. Writing a visual analysis is like other writing tasks: it gets easier with practice.

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Prompts for writing a visual analysis

These cover a broad range of topics. Select only those relevant to your task.

To examine

- What is the artwork's overall size and shape?
- What colours, objects, text, lines, and shapes are present in the artwork?
- Are objects or scenes portrayed as idealised; distorted; exaggerated; concealed; or blurred?
- Are any abstract elements presented derived from realistic forms?
- Does the artwork cause a response from you, such as shock, laughter, or threat?
- Does the artwork communicate an account, or story (e.g., historical event)?
- Does the artwork reflect movement, such as falling, speed, paralysis, action, motion?
- Is the artwork site-specific or made for multiple locations or settings?

To situate the artwork in context (may need research)

- Where was the artwork created or designed and how did this influence the artwork?
- Does the artwork reflect an established genre such as landscape; still life; fantasy; religion, etc.?
- How is the artwork located within the artist's own body of work?
- How does the artwork reflect social and cultural aspects of the place in which it was produced?
- Is this a famous painting, and what was happening when it was made?
- Was the work was influenced by ideologies or trends of the time?
- What personal or economic situation influenced the creation of this work?
- What comparison can you draw with the work of other artists who have explored this subject?

To analyse/interpret

- Do the objects used have symbolic value to convey deeper themes (e.g., iconography)?
- Which choices of subject matter communicate the artwork's particular mood?
- What might the artist be trying to say?
- What can we tell about people in the scene? For example, consider their age and attire, and if their pose or expression is suggestive of wealth or social standing, etc.
- Does the work appropriate ideas from other cultures, and what effect does this have?
- How might your own beliefs and upbringing distort your interpretation of the artwork?
- How does the layout of the artwork's subject assist with the communication of ideas?

References

Gale, A. (n.d.). How to Analyze an Artwork: A Step-by-Step-Guide. https://www.studentartguide.com/articles/how-to-analyze-an-artwork

Jason, A. (2024). Visual Analysis: How to Analyze a Painting and Write an Essay. https://essaypro.com/blog/visual-analysis

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Related helpsheets

- Chicago Referencing
- Chicago Footnoting Checklist
- Chicago Bibliography Checklist

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