

Formal Analysis Essay & Museum Visit

What is a formal analysis?

A formal analysis is the fundamental form of writing about art. In a strict formal analysis, no other information is required besides that which you can see; and while some knowledge of the subject matter helps, your focus should be on the visual elements of a work.

A formal analysis focuses on aspects like line, color, composition, and style, and describes the effect of these artistic decisions on the viewer. While any formal analysis must employ a good deal of description, it is important to remember that even a pure formal analysis must always be thesis-driven and each point should tie back to the overall interpretation of the work.

For a more elaborate discussion of formal analysis, see pages: 119-123 of Sylvan Barnet's *A Short Guide to Writing About Art* (8th ed.).

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Expectations for the Assignment:

- Your essay should be a formal, concise, grammatically correct piece of writing. I will grade your essays on **writing style, sophistication of your thoughts, utilization of art historical vocabulary, and overall flow.**
- You must write a **specific thesis statement** about your chosen artwork. Include that thesis in your introductory paragraph. **If your essay lacks a thesis or structure and organization, your grade will suffer.** An example thesis might be: “In Raphael’s *Marriage of the Virgin*, the artist uses one point perspective, balanced composition, and vibrant primary colors to convey a sense of stability and order, thus representing the Christian narrative in the idealized, harmonious aesthetics of the Renaissance.” Why is this a strong thesis? It lists the artist and *title* of the work, provides specific formal elements and principles of design which will be the focus of the paper AND explains what those formal elements achieve in the artwork.
- Anytime you reference the title of your image, **please *italicize* that title.** Be certain to introduce the artwork’s artist, title and date in the first paragraph.

Research and Formatting

- This essay **does not require the use of secondary resources**. However, if you do reference another scholar, **citations** must be used and a bibliography must be included. This includes the wall text from the museum. Please implement MLA or APA style for any references. Wikipedia is not a valid resource in my courses. However, the point of this exercise is **not to regurgitate someone else's thoughts but to voice your own**. Remember: plagiarism is borrowing anyone else's thoughts, words, or ideas without giving them due credit. When in doubt, cite your research! If you need help learning how/when to footnote/cite, please consult the MLA Handbook. If you wish to use another formatting style, please e-mail the instructor first.
- If you choose to use ANY information from the wall label next to the artwork, you must cite it. You can Google "how to cite a wall label" to find out more information about citing this type of source.
- When you are ready to submit your final essay, please **rename the file**: fa_lastname_firstname.doc (or .docx)
- I will only grade documents submitted **on time and in standard Word format**. All images must be included in your final document and not uploaded or e-mailed separately. Any assignments not properly loaded into the dropbox by the date indicated will not be graded. Consult your syllabus for the due date.
- Please **list your word count** at the end of your essay (you can see a total word count at the bottom of your Word document as you write).

Suggestions for Writing Your Formal Analysis:

1. Read the image as you would read text. Begin on one side and work across, relating what you see, or find the most important part of the image and read from that point. Do not skip around. You can even do this aloud to a friend or family member as a warm-up practice. Don't show them the artwork and then verbally tell them about everything you see in the painting. Then show them the artwork and see what you left out!
2. Describe some important details and/or discuss the materials or methods used to make the artwork.
3. Summarize the overall appearance of the piece.
4. Try to avoid too much interpretation about the artist's biography or cultural context. Focus on description.
5. Discuss SOME of the visual elements: Color, Value, Line, Shape, Form, Texture, Space. **Note that you will not have a successful essay if you attempt to write about every element.** Focus your thesis on the most important elements and those which make the artwork interesting or unique. Think about how those elements affect you as a viewer and how the elements might help the artist achieve his or her goal.
6. Discuss SOME of the principles of design: Balance, Proportion, Rhythm, Emphasis, Unity, Contrast, Variety.
7. Review: "Helpful Hints for Writing an Art History Paper."

- What is the subject matter being represented (if any):

The Formal Elements¹

Describe the “formal (physical, only what you can see)” qualities of the image. Focus on the following criteria and take notes below each element. Then, before you start writing, choose which elements are the most important in your selected image. Focus on those.

Examples and descriptions of all terms below are provided in part one of your textbook.

- **Line** is a mark with greater length than width. Lines can be horizontal, vertical, or diagonal; straight or curved; thick or thin. Are the lines used expressive, implied, and directional or do they add contour?
- **Shape** is a closed line. Shapes can be geometric, like squares and circles; or organic, like free form or natural shapes. Shapes are flat and can express length and width.

¹ Elements Definitions borrowed from
http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/building_lessons/formal_analysis.html

- **Forms** are three-dimensional shapes expressing length, width, and depth. Balls, cylinders, boxes, and pyramids are forms.

- **Space** is the area between and around objects. The space around objects is often called *negative* space; negative space has shape. Space can also refer to the feeling of depth. Real space is *three-dimensional*; in visual art, when we create the feeling or illusion of depth, we call it space. Is linear perspective used? Or atmospheric?

- **Color** is light reflected off of objects. Color has three main characteristics: *hue* (the name of the color, such as red, green, blue, etc.), *value* (how light or dark it is), and *intensity* (how bright or dull it is). Are the colors monochromatic? Analogous? Complimentary? Does the artwork use warm shades (like the colors of the sun and earth) or cool colors (like the colors of the sea and sky)? What effect do those colors have on you the viewer? How does the artist use light and shading?

- **Texture** is the surface quality that can be seen and felt. Textures can be rough or smooth, soft or hard. Textures do not always feel the way they look; for example, a drawing of a porcupine may look prickly, but if you touch the drawing, the paper is still smooth. What is the actual texture (please don't touch the artwork!!!) ☺ versus the implied texture?

Principles of Design

The principles of design describe the ways that artists use the elements of art in a work of art.

- **Balance** is the distribution of the visual weight of objects, colors, texture, and space. If the design was a scale, these elements should be balanced to make a design feel stable. In *symmetrical balance*, the elements used on one side of the design are similar to those on the other side; in *asymmetrical balance*, the sides are different but still look balanced. In radial balance, the elements are arranged around a central point and may be similar.

- **Emphasis** is the part of the design that catches the viewer's attention. Usually the artist will make one area stand out by contrasting it with other areas. The area could be different in size, color, texture, shape, etc.

- **Movement** is the path the viewer's eye takes through the work of art, often to focal areas. Such movement can be directed along lines, edges, shape, and color within the work of art.

- **Pattern** is the repeating of an object or symbol all over the work of art. Repetition works with pattern to make the work of art seem active. The repetition of elements of design creates unity within the work of art.

- **Proportion** is the feeling of unity created when all parts (sizes, amounts, or number) relate well with each other. When drawing the human figure, proportion can refer to the size of the head compared to the rest of the body.

- **Rhythm** is created when one or more elements of design are used repeatedly to create a feeling of organized movement. Rhythm creates a mood like music or dancing. To keep rhythm exciting and active, variety is essential.

- **Variety & Unity** is the use of several elements of design to hold the viewer's attention and to guide the viewer's eye through and around the work of art. **Unity** is the feeling of harmony between all parts of the work of art, which creates a sense of completeness.