

Visual Analysis Guide

A work of art is comprised of elements and principles of art and design. All works of art contain all elements and principles. By carefully observing the artist's use of these elements and principles, the viewer is able to take in more of the work of art and identify details more systematically.

Art Elements

Line — A line is a mark with great length than width. Lines can be vertical, horizontal, or diagonal. They can be actual, implied, or psychological. A line can be straight or curvilinear; thick or thin. In a work of art, you might identify outlines, contour lines, and/or directional lines.

Shape — A shape is a closed line. Shapes can be geometric or organic; actual or implied. In a work of art, you might notice that a shape is either flat or volumetric. A person is considered, in general, an organic shape, but can also be shown as proud, timid, strong, weak, beautiful, or grotesque. In describing shapes, pay attention to their size. Are the shapes proportional to one another or is one shape disproportionate?

Space — Space is the area around or between objects. For a two-dimensional work of art, you might describe the space by identifying objects in the various compositional planes (foreground, middle ground, or background). You can also look for specific types of perspective (linear, atmospheric), layering of objects, or foreshortening. For three-dimensional works, you can discuss the environment in which the work is located and the physical size of the work.

Light — Light can be a source of illumination within the work of art. You can describe light as actual or implied; natural or artificial. In examining the use of light, you can also look at shadows. If the work is three-dimensional, you might think about the manner in which the work interacts with the light and how the light and shadows change over the course of a day.

Color — Colors can be described in a number of ways. You can discuss color scheme (open/closed, warm/cool, analogous, complementary, triadic). You can also describe the colors in terms of their hue (such as red, orange, yellow, green, etc.), value (light or dark), and intensity (bright or dull). Look for primary, secondary, and intermediate colors.

Texture — Texture is the surface quality that can be seen or touched. You should describe textures using adjectives (rough, smooth, hard, soft, etc.). The actual texture is what you would feel if you could touch the work of art. The implied texture is the texture the artist is trying to convey through the medium.

Art Principles

Consider how the artist utilized the Elements of Art to produce these design principles.

Balance — Balance is comprised of unity and variety, but works can also be described as symmetric or asymmetric. Balance is the distribution of the visual weight of objects as seen through the use of the elements of art. Artists use variety to create interest in a work of art, while unity is used to create a work.

Rhythm/Movement — Rhythm is created by repetition, while movement is the path the viewer's eye travels on throughout the work of art. In describing the use of rhythm or movement, look for patterns or repeated objects. You will also describe how your eye moves through the work of art, as guided by the use of the elements.

Emphasis — The emphasis of a work refers to a focal point in the image or object. Identify the focal point and then describe what elements the artist uses to direct the viewer's attention to this location.