

Writing and Tutorial Center

Art History: Finding Meaning in the Image

Evaluating and writing about visual material uses many of the same analytical skills utilized in other fields, such as history or literature. Art history writing is unique in that it blends formal analysis, historical context, and critical interpretation—however, gathering evidence from close observations of objects or images is imperative.

Art history papers generally fall into several key categories:

Formal Analysis – A detailed description and visual analysis of an artwork’s composition, color, texture, space, and technique.

Comparative Analysis – A discussion of two or more artworks, focusing on similarities and differences in form, content, and historical significance.

Research Papers – These papers require students to engage with historical sources, art theory, and criticism to support an argument.

Exhibition Reviews & Critical Essays – Writing that evaluates an exhibition or an argument in art criticism.

DEVELOPING A THESIS STATEMENT

A strong thesis in art history should present an argument about an artwork rather than simply describe it. Move beyond “This painting is beautiful” to “This painting’s use of light and shadow reflects Renaissance ideals of humanism.”

Ask open-ended questions: What is the artist trying to convey? How does the visual composition support this message?

Encourage specificity: Instead of “This artwork is influential,” ask, “How did this artwork influence later movements or artists?”

TIPS

OBSERVATION AND INTERPRETATION

Many students struggle with including too much description or not providing enough analysis; the ideal paper should strike a balance between the two. A formal analysis requires close looking and precise description, then synthesizes those observations to uncover a deeper understanding about the work. Write with clarity, precision, and objectivity—while avoiding vague language and unnecessary jargon. The more specific a description is, the stronger it will be.

Art history writing should be clear and engaging. Be bold! You can essentially state your observations as a fact, as long as you justify those interpretations through sound reasoning.

Approaching this as though you are describing the work to someone who can’t see it but needs to draw it is helpful—the more details one can provide, the more accurate that drawing will be.

Use the “Describe, Interpret, Support” method:

Describe – What do you see? (Colors, lines, shapes, textures, etc.)

Interpret – What do these elements suggest?

Support – How does this interpretation connect to a historical or cultural context?

Include art history specific vocabulary and precise terminology (e.g. chiaroscuro, linear perspective, sfumato).

Instead of writing with a passive voice: “It is believed that Caravaggio used light dramatically,” assert something like “Caravaggio dramatically manipulated light.”

Cohesion is important! Ensure each paragraph has a clear topic sentence (which connects back to the overall thesis) and logical flow.

It’s a simple thing but you should always read back over your writing. You might catch things you missed or find new ways to refine your descriptions. Focus on higher-order concerns (argument, structure) before the grammar.

EFFECTIVELY INTEGRATING SOURCES AND CITATIONS

Art history writing often relies on a mix of primary sources (artist writings, contemporary critiques) and secondary sources (scholarly articles, biographies, textbooks, etc.).

Chicago style footnotes tend to be standard across the discipline. Example:
John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC, 1972), 45.

It’s often (but not always) more efficient to paraphrase your sources to support your own analysis rather than being overly reliant on direct quotes.

Make sure to distinguish between primary and secondary sources.

Double-check the formatting of your footnotes and/or bibliography.

"[JSTOR](#)" & "[Artstor](#)" – Digital archives for art history research.

"[The Chicago Manual of Style \(CMS\)](#)" – The standard citation style for art history papers.

"[Smarthistory](#)" – Free academic resources on art history.

"[Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](#)" – Contextual essays on art movements.

"[Oxford Art Online](#)" – Scholarly articles and reference materials.