

Writing and Tutorial Center

Formal Analysis: The Language of Art

Here are some simple but comprehensive ways to break down any work of art. When writing a visual analysis, an easy way to get started is to observe how the artwork might connect to the **Elements of Art**:

Line: a continuous mark, often used to define edges, contours, and suggest movement or direction.

Shape: a two-dimensional area enclosed by a line or boundary, can be geometric or organic.

Form: a three-dimensional object with length, width, and height, which includes volume and depth.

Space: the area around, within, or between objects, used to create depth and perspective.

Value: the lightness or darkness of a color, used to create contrast and depth.

Texture: the surface quality of an artwork, whether actual (like a rough wall) or implied (created by brushstrokes).

Color: the visual perception of light, characterized by hue, saturation, and value, used to evoke emotions and create visual interest.

From there, you can get into even more detail by going through the **Principles of Design**:

Emphasis: creating a hierarchy or focal point to guide the eye to a specific element first; often utilizes color, contrast, proportion, or rhythm.

Balance: weighing or arranging the elements within the image to create visual, even distribution of shape and space.

Unity: aligning all separate elements to work together in harmony through pattern, balance, and rhythm.

Contrast: can highlight differences or add a focal point by using opposing colors, shades, or textures.

Rhythm: directs the eye through form with the use of repetition of shape, lines, or color and creates mood.

Proportion: or scale, to use a base for a viewer to compare single elements through size, dimension, and space.

Variety: utilizing different shapes, colors and textures to keep overall images interesting; also aids with creating a focal point.

Some individual elements may not apply to a specific work, such as color for black and white photographs, so it makes much more sense to focus on other options.

TIPS

Organize the points in a logical order for your writing and begin to assess why the artist chose to depict things as they did. What was the purpose of the work? And how does the use of each element contribute to that purpose?

Start with an overall view, then show how each element contributes to the whole. How are they arranged? Is the work balanced? Is there a focal point? Is there a sense of movement? Consider why the artist chose to include certain elements and how each element contributes to your response to the work. You may also want to consider elements the artist did not include.

HOW TO START YOUR ANALYSIS

Begin by examining the work and identifying all of the visual elements. To identify formal elements, some questions you may ask are: What is the material? Where is the focal point? What is the subject matter (what does it represent)? To identify how these elements function, some questions you may ask are: What emotions do the lines evoke? What does the visual hierarchy say about the subject? What mood does the palette convey?

Questions will depend upon the work that is being examined and what you want to argue in your thesis. Below is a form and function chart to help guide you through your analysis. This template can be edited to suit your needs for the work being analysed. Keep in mind the form is what you see and the function is what it does or the meaning conveyed.

For example, in Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893) you could say:

Form:

Line ~ thick, wavy

Function:

~creates a sense of urgency

CHART

	Form	Function
Material Shape, Texture, Opacity, Synthetic / Organic		
Size / Scale Volume, Shape, Relation to Body		
Composition Perspective, Focal Point, Depth, Dynamics / Movement		
Color Palette, Hue, Value, Background		
Line Weight, Style, Brushstrokes		
Context Display, Lighting, Exhibition Space		