

Visual Analysis Paper

ARH 141 Spring 2024

Guidelines for Visual/Formal Analysis Paper

Organization and Format:

- Start with an intro paragraph that includes a thesis statement at the end that summarizes the major, distinctive formal qualities of the work.
- Include several paragraphs of description of the piece that call attention to the details of the work that led you to your thesis statement. You might want to deal with a different quality in each paragraph (e.g. one paragraph about the background of the painting, one paragraph about the use of color, one paragraph about the brushstrokes, etc.)
- As you write about each quality, move from description to analysis. Why are these visual qualities significant? What do they tell us about the artwork itself? (e.g. “The use of diagonal lines draws the viewer’s attention to one important figure in the painting” or, “The painter’s use of soft light and a muted color palette creates a serene, idealized mood”)
- End with a conclusion paragraph that summarizes your analysis, restates your thesis and (maybe) introduces further questions you have about the work.

Style Guidelines:

- 2 pages total (not less than 2!)
- Times New Roman, size 12 font, double-spaced, default margins (1”)
- Include your name, the class, my name, and the date at the top left corner
- Include the name of the artwork and the artist in your paper’s title
- DUE at noon (12 pm) on 3/14 on Blackboard under Assignments
- Can be Word Document, Google Doc, or PDF

How to Do Visual/Formal Analysis

Formal or visual analysis is about close looking, observing and describing a piece's physical and compositional qualities in order to understand something more about it. This can include thinking about the object/image's use of size, composition, pictorial space, form, line, color, light, tone, and texture. Formal analysis is not about your personal opinion of the piece (what you like or don't like), but rather about using visual evidence to support a reading of the artwork.

Questions to get you started if you feel stuck:

- How are the different components of the object or image arranged?
- Are there any figures looking at or gesturing toward something? How are the figures interacting with each other (if there are figures)?
- Is the composition symmetrical or asymmetrical?
- What colors are present? Are they warm or cool? Muted or saturated/vivid?
- Do certain colors stand out from the others? Do they complement each other or clash with each other?
- How would you describe the quality of the lines (heavy, thin, rough, smooth, horizontal, diagonal, vertical)? Do the lines create a sense of movement or direction?
- How large or small is the object overall? Is that notable?
- What materials is the object or image made of? Are there materials being mixed and juxtaposed and if so, what effect does that have?
- Are the figures naturalistic or abstract? Are they distorted, elongated, idealized?
- How do shapes repeat throughout the composition?
- How does the artwork make use of negative space?
- Does the material have a physical texture? How would you describe it?

(Adapted from UNC Writing Center Art History Handout, <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/art-history/>)