



Tips for Writing an Art History Paper

by Jenny Lauer

Art history papers are unique in that they require the student not only to visually analyze a specific work or artistic movement, but also to synthesize relevant social and historical information related to the artistic subject. The challenge, here, is to make connections between the descriptive, visual analysis of the work and the research about the work in a manner that is logical, coherent, and constructive enough to make a point or carve out an argument (Gocsik, 2004).

Gocsik advises a certain structure within paragraphs to achieve this goal:

“Be aware that paragraphs in Art History papers are often constructed so that the topic sentences are at the end. Typically, students are trained in their composition courses to begin their paragraphs with a topic sentence. However, in Art history, students will often find paragraphs constructed with the topic sentences at the end. In these kinds of paragraphs, details build towards an observation or argument. When creating a paragraph that ends with a topic sentence, you need to be especially careful that your details are well-chosen and logically expressed, and that they build towards the point you are making” (2004).

There are a number of approaches to writing an art history paper, but the main ones are as follows (and depend, of course, on how appropriate each is for answering the question prompted by your professor). These examples can help guide a student in crafting their paper:

1. **Formal Analysis:** Discuss the visual characteristics of the piece of art you are writing about, using your own interpretation as the inspiration for your writing (Custom-Writing.org, 2010). Although your response can be supplemented by research, your own personal response to the work is just as relevant, and ensures a level of originality and authenticity in your observations. This kind of analysis is *pure description*- you are writing about what you *see* without analyzing or interpreting it. here are some tips for pure description from Terry Barrett’s page on formal analysis:

The various elements that constitute a description include:

- a. Form of art whether architecture, sculpture, painting or one of the minor arts
- b. Medium of work whether clay, stone, steel, paint, etc., and technique (tools used)
- c. Size and scale of work (relationship to person and/or frame and/or context)
- d. Elements or general shapes (architectural structural system) within the composition, including building of post-lintel construction or painting with several figures lined up in a row; identification of objects
- e. Description of axis whether vertical, diagonal, horizontal, etc.
- f. Description of line, including contour as soft, planar, jagged, etc
- g. Description of how line describes shape and space (volume); distinguish between lines of objects and lines of composition, e.g., thick, thin, variable, irregular, intermittent, indistinct, etc.

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- h. Relationships between shapes, e.g., large and small, overlapping, etc.
 - i. Description of color and color scheme = palette
 - j. Texture of surface or other comments about execution of work
 - k. Context of object: original location and date (Barrett, Terry 1994).
2. **Sociological Method:** This approach explains the piece from the point of view of an art historical/historical era. You will have to employ the social and historical influences which shaped the work, and how those influences manifested in the artistic movement of which the work you have chosen may be a part. Examples might include the influence of WWII or the Industrial Revolution on the work (Custom-Writing.org, 2010).
 3. **Biographical Method:** A method that requires analyzing the work of art with information from the artist's life (Custom-Writing.org, 2010). Often, aspects of the artist's life such as his or her religious convictions, childhood, education, etc. heavily shaped his or her style, subject matter, or art making process. Connecting the life events and the beliefs and ideas of the artist to his art is key in exploring the realm of how an artist's life has shaped his or her work.
 4. **Iconographical Method:** An art history paper that analyzes the meaning of symbols in a work of art to get at the deeper meanings attached.

Depending upon the method chosen to write the paper (and it may be a combination of these), there are corresponding considerations for how to structure the argument. According to Gocsik...

“Structure them chronologically if you are discussing an artistic movement or a specific artist's progression; spatially if you are discussing the elements of a specific work; relationally if you are discussing a work in relation to a movement or another work; and so on” (2004).

Often, an art history paper will require the student to provide images in the text for reference. When you refer to the image in the text, the words are usually in *Italics*. Often, the image will be preceded with a heading, like “figure one,” and then list the relevant information about the work, including artist, title, year, medium, location, art historical movement, etc.

Works Cited

Barrett, Terry. (1994) *Art Criticism and Formal Analysis Outline*. From Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary. Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company.

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