Guide to Writing a Visual Analysis

Knowing how to write a visual analysis (sometimes called a formal analysis) of a work of art is a fundamental skill in an introduction to visual art course. This assignment addresses the following course outcomes:

1. Identify and analyze the elements of art and the principles of design.
2. Discuss artwork using appropriate vocabulary.
3. Identify varied media associated with art processes.

This guide is designed to help you write and organize your visual analysis. Not everything in this guide applies to every work of art and it is not always helpful to use the order given.

Required Length & Format

3 – 5 pages; if you write only 3 pages, they MUST be 3 full pages. 10 points will be lost for short papers. I will not accept papers that are two pages or less. Typed, double-spaced in the body. Do not double-space the header on page 1.

One-inch margins, Times New Roman, size 12

Your name goes on the first page. Subsequent pages have your last name and page number. Do not make a coversheet. Submit as a PDF or Word file format in your Blackboard course shell using the provided link.

Choosing Your Work

You will choose a selected work from the Arkansas Arts Center’s exhibition “Independent Vision: Modern and Contemporary Art from the Martin Muller Collection.” This exhibition is free and runs through December 30. Discuss any alternatives with me.

Check hours and exhibition schedule on their website: www.arkansasartscenter.org

Header – This should be single spaced!

Your name
Section #60 (online)
Visual Analysis
Date

Title of your work in italics
Artist name
Date of creation
Dimensions (approximate, give your best estimation)
Medium(s)

I. Description

In the first part of your paper, write a brief introduction to the work you chose. You will be repeating the information listed above in the header, but in narrative style with a conversational tone.
1. What is the subject matter and style?
2. Who is the artist?
3. Date of the work?
4. Location of the work?
5. Technique or medium?

Make sure you put the title of the work of art in italics when you use it in the paper and refer to the artist with their last name.

**Key and Relevant Information**

This is can be broken into smaller paragraphs. It can be in any order. Include specific details about the work.

A. Description of the orientation. Is this work **horizontal** or **vertical**?
B. Description of the **style** (representational, non-objective, or abstract).
C. Description of **two dominant elements of art** that you will analyze.
D. Description of **symmetrical** or **asymmetrical** balance.
E. Description of the **scale** (small-scale, life-size, larger-than-life).
F. Description of the **focal point(s)** and/or **area(s) of emphasis**.
G. Identify the **media, medium(s), or process**.

**II: Elements and Principles**

This is the second and most important part of your paper. It will be the longest part of your paper. It should be broken into several paragraphs.

In this part of your paper, you expand on the descriptions you wrote in the description. **ONLY** those terms that best apply to the work of art you have chosen are the **DOMINANT ELEMENTS**. They are the two elements that are “doing” the most work in the composition. There may be other elements you would like to tie to the dominant ones, but do not include information about elements that are not important to the composition. Be specific and accurate in your explanation of the elements and principles.

**EXPLAIN** the dominant visual elements using details from the work. **CONNECT** the DOMINANT ELEMENTS to the principles of design from your description.

Example: Pablo Picasso, *Girl Before a Mirror*

*Style:* Abstract (simplified and distorted)
*Dominant elements:* Color, shape
*Balance:* Asymmetrical
*Scale:* almost life-size
*Focal point/ area of emphasis:* her face, stomach, her reflection’s stomach

In Part II, you could write your first paragraph about how color and repeated, distorted shapes make the woman’s figure abstracted. Your next paragraph might be about how the oval shape of the mirror on the right balances the woman’s body on the left. You then observe that the size of the work makes the woman’s figure nearly life-size and that a viewer observes her as she looks at herself in the mirror. Then, you might describe how the pattern of diamonds and dots in the background make the woman’s body stand out. You could also write about how color is used to split her face into two halves, making it a focal point. Next, you might observe that the lines of her arm bring your eye over...
to the dark reflection in the mirror. Line is not one of your dominant elements, but it’s fine to add this because it is relevant. This is a simple outline of your paragraphs. Your paper needs to have more discussion and description of each of these ideas.

You are connecting the dominant elements you chose to the principles of balance, scale/proportion, emphasis/focal point. The principle of contrast is related to emphasis. **Unity** (repetition) and **variety** (difference) can also be discussed.

Explain what the elements and principles are **DOING**. For example, if you discuss contrast, explain **how it is created** through **value** (see Judith Decapitating Holofernes or Obey). **Color** can create **emphasis** by becoming the **focal point**. **Unity** can be achieved through repeated **shapes** and **lines** and **scale** can be used to create emphasis (**Great Wave**).

**Part III: Media and Processes**

In class, you completed a Media Analysis that asked you to think about the materials or the techniques used to create a work of art and how those materials or techniques communicate meaning in the artwork. In this section, make note of the media, medium(s), or processes used to create the work you selected and how these materials and techniques shape your understanding. How does the way it was made, or what it is made of, affect the way it looks or the way you feel about it?

**Part IV: Opinions and Conclusion**

**This is the last paragraph of your paper.** In this section, discuss how and why the key elements and principles of art used by the artist create meaning. Support your personal interpretation of the work’s meaning with specific details from the work of art.

**Your conclusions are based on analysis and observation. Every opinion should be supported with a specific detail from the work.**

**General Suggestions**

1. You should allow time to view the work you plan to write about and take notes. Multiple visits are recommended. There is no substitute for spending time with the actual, physical work of art.

2. Always italicize or underline the title of the work of art. If the title is long, use it in full the first time you mention it, but shorten it every time after that.

3. Use the present tense when you describe the work of art.

4. Be specific and accurate. Don’t use “picture” if you can more specifically say, for example, “drawing.” Don’t call a photograph and painting, for example.

5. Most visual analysis papers do not require footnotes or citations, but if it is needed, you must refer to Barnet’s A Short Guide to Writing About Art, which is based on the Chicago Manual of Style. MLA style is not acceptable for papers in art history. You may also refer to this website for quick reference: [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html).

6. Allow time to proofread your paper and read it out loud to see if it makes sense.

7. Ask me for help. Take time to look up my office hours and location. Make time to get help.