

## Writing a Formal Analysis in Art History

The goal of a formal analysis is to explain how the formal elements of a work of art affect the representation of the subject matter and expressive content. The emphasis should be on *analyzing* the formal elements—not interpreting the artwork. That said, an understanding of the meaning of the work is the final goal of any formal analysis.

### Getting Started:

It may be helpful to start by looking at the work of art and identifying the visual elements. How are they arranged? Is the work balanced? Is there a focal point? Is there a sense of movement? You might consider why the artist chose to include certain elements and how each element contributes to your response to the work.

#### Formal elements of painting:

- picture plane
- composition
- color
  - hue
  - value
  - saturation
  - intensity
  - warm/cool
  - primary/secondary
  - complementary
- line
  - contour lines
  - lines of direction or movement
- shape
- contrast
- texture
- technique [linear vs. painterly]
- illusionistic space

#### Formal elements of sculpture:

- scale
- in-the-round vs. relief
- directionality
- shape [organic vs. geometric]
- open form /closed form [silhouette]
- material
- texture
- volume
- light and shadow
- color
- technique [additive vs. subtractive]

**The Thesis Statement:** Your thesis should provide a framework for your analysis and suggest your interpretation of the work. A thesis statement does not necessarily involve a statement of argument or original insight, but it should let the reader know how the artist's formal choices affect the viewer.

Example of an effective thesis statement: In *Club Night*, George Bellows uses high contrast, shape, and line to capture the energy of the athletes and provide an evocative and sensational interpretation of the club scene.



**The Analysis:** Although description is an important part of a formal analysis, description is not enough on its own. You must introduce and contextualize your descriptions of the formal elements of the work so the reader understands how each element influences the work's overall effect on the viewer. You may include your emotional responses to a work, but you must explain them and back them up with evidence, the formal elements that elicit your emotional response (Barnet, 34).

Example of effective analysis: Bellows traces the boxers' limbs with distinct, arcing lines that define the curvature of each muscle and give the viewer a sense of the energy in their bodies. These long brushstrokes convey stability and fluidity, whereas the short brushstrokes in the boxers' upper bodies suggest an immense accumulation of tension, like a coiled spring. Additionally, strong diagonal lines in the boxers create a sense of lunging, dynamic movement.

Note: All description and analysis should relate to your thesis.

### **Suggested Structure for a Formal Analysis:**

**Introduction:** The introduction should identify the title of the work of art, the name of the artist, and the date when it was created. You may also indicate the medium, the period in which it was created and its current location. While biographical information about the artist is not necessary, if you know something about the artist's interests or the interests of the period that may have influenced this work, you may include it here. Typically, your introduction should conclude with your thesis statement, which will suggest the meaning or content of the work in order to introduce the formal elements you have chosen to analyze.

**Body/Development of Analysis:** In the most straightforward organization, each element you discuss in your paper should be analyzed in its own paragraph. You may find it helpful to begin each paragraph with a topic sentence about the significance of the element and end with a concluding statement. You may also organize your analyses of the formal elements according to major figures, a focal point, or other significant effects in the composition.

**Conclusion:** The conclusion may summarize your findings and relate back to the theme presented in your introduction; however, you should avoid simply repeating what you offered in the introduction. You may also include any new ideas, insights, or understandings you gained about the work through the analysis process.

### **Work Referenced:**

Barnet, Sylvan. *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*. Eighth Edition. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008.

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For more information about writing a formal analysis, see the handout titled "Writing an Art History Paper," on the Writing Center Web site, or Sylvan Barnet's *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, Eighth Edition.

This handout is based on handouts provided by Prof. Deborah Pokinski and compiled by Hannah Zucker '15. HZ would like to thank Prof. Sharon Williams for her feedback and assistance.