



Art History

What this handout is about

This handout discusses several common types of art history assignments, and talks about various strategies and resources that will help you write your art history papers.

What is art history?

Many students do not get a chance to study art history until they take a college course, so art history may be a new field of study for you. Even though you are new to analyzing the visual arts, the skills you have learned in other fields will serve you well in this discipline. If you have ever analyzed a poem or developed an understanding of a historical period, you are prepared to think and write like an art historian. You must still make an argument about something, but in this case you will use art (instead of, say, dialogue from a play) to build and defend your argument.

Although art historians vary in their approaches to art, there are a few common approaches that form the backbone of the field. The following handout describes these approaches briefly and lets you know what you might need to do to tackle a paper assignment in this field. Just remember: there is more than one way of doing art history. Understanding your instructor's approach to art will help you meet his or her expectations in your writing.

Assignment sleuth work

When your instructor hands out a paper assignment, first figure out what type of assignment it is. The basic questions of art history often appear in a few traditional types of assignments. We've presented a summary of five of them below. Becoming acquainted with the five types will help you begin to understand your assignment. Recognize, however, that many assignments combine more than one of these types. Most assignments will fit into one or more of the types, but don't try to make your assignment fit them if it does not. Some professors prefer to take a less traditional approach to the assignments they write, and they may be looking for less traditional responses from their students. Start by reading the assignment carefully to see what is being asked (see our handout on understanding assignments for further tips).

Some professors in introductory classes will start with at least one of the following assignments at the beginning of the semester in order to get you thinking like an art historian.

Formal analysis

This assignment requires a detailed description of the “formal” qualities of the art object (formal here means “related to the form,” not “fancy” or “elegant”). In other words, you’re looking at the individual design elements, such as composition (arrangement of parts of or in the work), color, line, texture, scale, proportion, balance, contrast, and rhythm. Your primary concern in this assignment is to attempt to explain how the artist arranges and uses these various elements.

Usually you have to go and look at the object for a long time and then write down what you see. As you will quickly see from the page length of the assignment, your instructor expects a highly detailed description of the object. You might struggle with this assignment because it is hard to translate what you see into words—don’t give up, and take more notes than you might think you need.

Why would your instructor ask you to do this assignment? First, translating something from a visual language to a textual language is one of the most vital tasks of the art historian. Most art historians at some point describe fully and accurately their objects of study in order to communicate their ideas about them. You may already have found this tendency helpful in reading your textbook or other assigned readings. Second, your instructors realize that you are not accustomed to scrutinizing objects in this way and know that you need practice doing so. Instructors who assign formal analyses want you to look—and look carefully. Think of the object as a series of decisions that an artist made. Your job is to figure out and describe, explain, and interpret those decisions and why the artist may have made them.

Ideally, if you were to give your written formal analysis to a friend who had never seen the object, s/he would be able to describe or draw the object for you, or at least pick it out of a lineup.

In writing a formal analysis, focus on creating a logical order so that your reader doesn’t get lost. Don’t ever assume that because your instructor has seen the work, he or she knows what you are talking about. **Here are a couple of options:**

- summarize the overall appearance, then describe the details of the object
- describe the composition and then move on to a description of the materials used (acrylic, watercolor, plaster)
- begin discussing one side of the work and then move across the object to the other side
- describe things in the order in which they draw your eye around the object, starting with the first thing you notice and moving to the next

Some instructors want your formal analysis to consist of pure description with little or no interpretation. In this case, you should just describe your object. Others will expect you to go further and comment on the significance of what you have observed. Find out which way your instructor

wants you to write your formal analysis in your particular assignment. Most art historians include formal analysis at some point in their essays, so there are a lot of examples to look at in the textbook and other readings, but you will probably have to be more in-depth than they are.

Stylistic analysis

You may be asked to look at an object and talk about style. Some instructors will want you to discuss how an object fits into a particular stylistic category—for example, Impressionism, Renaissance, or early Macedonian. More often, they will ask you to compare two works in either the same or very different stylistic categories—e.g., comparing one Impressionist painting by Monet to one by Morisot or comparing a Caravaggio still life to a Picasso still life. **You will still focus on the formal qualities of the objects, but this time you will probably be expected to make a conclusion about one of the following:**

- how the work fits the stylistic category
- how the work does not fit the category
- how two works with the same type of content look totally different from each other, because of the style (for example, both paintings are still lifes, but they show different approaches to three-dimensionality, etc.)

A stylistic analysis will acquaint you with some of the larger historical trends and forces in the culture and how they influenced the development of art.

Iconography/iconology

This kind of assignment occurs in courses covering art before the Modern period. **Here you will look for a particular element that occurs in the object (an object, action, gesture, pose) and explain either:**

- when that same element occurs in other objects through history and how this object's representation of it is unique, or
- what that element means generally in art or to art historians—in other words, the traditional association an art historian might make between that depiction and some other thing.

For example, there have been thousands of paintings of Hercules choosing between Virtue and Vice. Let's say you are assigned one of these paintings (e.g., Annibale Carracci's version), and you are asked to find out what is unique about it. You would go look at other versions, like Paolo Veronese's, and compare how they both show Hercules making his choice. You do not have to focus on the actual making of the object here, but instead on the way the subject is represented: Carracci has Virtue and Vice in Ancient clothing, but Veronese shows them in contemporary Venetian costumes. Then, you might have to say what that means: Carracci spent a lot of time in Rome looking at Ancient art, so he was interested in using Ancient art works as models in his paintings, but Veronese was showing off one of the main industries of Venice (textiles)—or, Veronese wanted his patrons to think about how they might fit into the scenario instead of keeping the story in the past.

If you are confused, read Erwin Panofsky's essays on iconology and iconography, in which he defines these terms more extensively. Be warned that Panofsky makes a clear distinction between iconography and iconology, but many art historians do not—they often use the word “iconography” when they mean both. Art historians study iconography and iconology so often that they have compiled reference texts that list many of the famous works that show particular themes—you might use these as a resource, so ask the art librarian about them. One such resource is the *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* by James Hall.

Provenance/patronage study

Some assignments require you to examine the life of the object itself: the circumstances surrounding its production and/or where and why it has changed hands throughout history. **These assignments focus on either:**

- how, when, where, and why the patron (the person who orders or buys the object, or generally supports the artist) asked for or acquired the object from the artist. The assignment may ask you to comment on what the patronage suggests about how artists made their living at different points in history, or how/why patrons chose the artists they did, or
- the history of the object passing from artist to patron to museum, etc. Such assignments usually appear in classes oriented toward museum studies.

The assignment may also ask you to comment on the significance of this history. For example, why/how a bust of the Goddess Sekhmet from the Temple of Mut could end up as one foot of a British garden bench, and what that says about the owner's attitudes toward the object.

Theory/criticism

All four of the previous assignment types focus on the object itself (the painting, sculpture, drawing, or building). However, in some courses, particularly in Modern Art courses, you may be asked to look beyond or through the object toward theoretical, historical, or social contexts of the object, artist, or time period.

Instructors may want you to talk about how the formal or stylistic qualities of the object reflect or affect the time in which they were made. More specifically, you may be asked to look at the object's relationship to ideas about gender, class, artistic creation, culture, or politics associated with that time. Or you may be asked to connect artworks with the theories of a particular person (for example, the connection between paintings by Surrealist Salvador Dali and Sigmund Freud's dream analyses).

Let's take one popular modern artist and look at how many different ways he has been studied from a theoretical/critical perspective. **Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionist paintings have been discussed as all of the following (to list just a few):**

- stemming from and/or helping to create an American post-war culture of masculinity and superiority
- exploring the relationship between American culture and its “Native American roots”
- portraying a stylistic progression from a more realistic/naturalistic representation to a more abstract representation that emphasizes the flatness of the canvas and the paint over content or narrative
- pointing out the cowardice and malleability of wealthy American patrons.

As you can see, these assignments may leave you a fair amount of latitude in finding and pursuing a topic. Regardless of the theoretical perspectives you use or apply, be sure that your paper contains a strong argument (See the Writing Center’s handout on writing academic arguments for further guidance). Remember to pay attention to what your instructor does in class—learning to recognize and understand the theories your instructor uses can help you both in studying for class and in following your instructor’s assignments.

Remember, too, that even when you are writing a theory/criticism paper, the art object or objects should be at the forefront of your discussion. The theory or criticism should arise out of the art, rather than be superimposed on it. A good way to keep your focus on the object is to write a formal analysis before getting into the theory; you may not include this analysis in your final paper, but writing it will give you insight into the object or objects you are discussing. You may also wish to keep an image of the object or objects in view as you write.

Tracking down the resources

After you analyze what type of assignment you have been given, you will need to review resources that will help you to answer that type of question. **You may have to find any or all of the following books or materials:**

- the object itself or a book that talks about it at length
- your textbook (look through the whole thing—there are often helpful glossaries and timelines, and bibliographies for further reading)
- standard art-historical reference texts (especially for iconographical or patronage studies); if your instructor hasn’t let you know what these might be, see the art librarian or browse the reference section of the art library
- theory or analysis that has already been written (usually articles or books rather than survey texts or dictionaries)

The more object-oriented research assignments will require you to spend more time with monographs, catalogues raisonnées, and art history reference books. The first two types of books focus on an artist’s entire body of work and/or biography and give details that might not show up in a more theoretical text (like the measurements of the objects, their provenance, details about their condition, etc.).

The more theoretical the assignment, the more time you will spend reading journal articles and (sometimes indirectly related) books. Even when writing a more theoretical paper, don't ever forget the art object—it is the reason for your paper and your primary “text,” and should be emphasized accordingly.

The “pure” formal analysis is the only paper in which description alone is enough—so if you are asked to compare two objects, do not just list their similar and different qualities. Instead, suggest what those differences or similarities mean and analyze them on some level.

Additional resources

Several books have been written specifically to help you write a paper in art history. All are pretty widely available, so check your library and local bookstores:

- Acton, Mary. *Learning to Look at Paintings*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Barnet, Sylvan. *A Short Guide to Writing about Art*. New York: Harper Collins College, 1993.
- Taylor, Joshua. *Learning to Look: A Handbook for the Visual Arts*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1981.

Many professors have used Taylor's book at some point, so keep that in mind.

If you need more examples of how art history can be done, read articles in *Art Bulletin* or *Art Journal* or one of the many other journals available in the field. The list of sources cited in the bibliography of your textbook (if you have one) may provide another way to understand the various approaches in art history. Pick a few that cover the same time period or monuments and glance over them. Since textbooks are usually compilations of various arguments in the field (they're called survey texts because they survey the field), they will be too general or combinatory to really show you how art history is usually written.

For help understanding art history jargon and theory, check out the following resources:

- Pointon, Marcia. *History of Art: A Student's Handbook*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Tate's online art terms glossary
- Khan Academy's art history glossary

To look up recent articles (for the last 20 years or so), ask your librarian about the Art Index, RILA, BHA, and Avery Index. Check out www.lib.unc.edu/art/index.html.

Citation style

Art history does not have an established documentation style, although Chicago predominates. The *Art Bulletin* is considered the conservative flagship journal of the discipline, and once a year they provide their ideal documentation style. This journal probably provides the safest choice if you seek a model style.

Go to the source

Because many methodologies and perspectives coexist in art history, asking your instructor for comments on your draft ahead of the due date will give you the best guidance on your paper. Find out exactly what s/he is looking for and read his/her comments carefully. Most instructors are thrilled when students seem genuinely excited by the material and willing to try their best. Do not be shy with your enthusiasm, and you will probably find your instructor more than willing to help you (if you don't believe us or are nervous about this, see our handout on getting feedback).



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