A BRIEF GUIDE
TO WRITING IN ART HISTORY

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The Purpose of Art Writing

Works of art seem, by their very nature, to resist language. The ones we return to may leave us more with wordless feelings than coherent arguments. If art and the emotions attendant to it reside outside language, how can the writer in Art History proceed? Writing about art need not be a substitute for art, though. Indeed, the aim of art writing is not to be the work it describes, but rather to bring readers (back) to the work to see it better.

Faced with your assignment, a helpful place to begin is with a question: “What is this art asking me to see, that I do not already see?” Look closely: sit with the work if it is at a museum, watch a film’s scenes multiple times, make several visits to a work of architecture, or study the work in ArtStor so you can zoom in and examine its details—with each encounter, take notes. Then visit the library. Library research allows you to set the object in its moment and put yourself in dialogue with art historians. Finally, embarking on your draft, ask yourself: “How can I help my reader see the newness of this work and the past itself?”

Writing in Art History will help you develop the following skills: (1) a keen, receptive, curious gaze, (2) an openness to the emotive, cognitive and affective qualities of artworks, (3) confidence using library databases and accessing academic collections, (4) the ability to describe with accuracy a work of architecture, film, sculpture, performance, painting, photograph, art object, and (5) facility reading and analyzing others’ research. In practicing these skills, you develop your ability to gain and communicate insights into visual culture. “The goal of the art historian is to reveal a
work of art to the reader. Things otherwise unseen become visible, thanks to the art historian’s words.”¹

Even as writing in Art History aims at new ways of seeing, it avoids absolutist claims, remaining keen to the way objects always exceed meaning. Writers in the field will often begin a project with a sustaining question instead of a totalizing thesis. For example: “What makes this art?” “How is this work challenging conventions within its genre?” “How is this film both of and against its time?” “Why were these artists included and these others excluded?” “What values are expressed in this museum space?”

Art writing further gains in persuasiveness by avoiding projection or personal narrative. When Art Historians attend, over time, to a work’s materials, components, influences, context, iconography and historical lineage, they are letting the art speak first. You can see, too, that there are many paths into an artwork; out of this diversity and the biases that shape them, debates in the field grow. As with most writing in the humanities, then, writing in Art History depends upon careful attention to and analysis of primary sources, alongside archival research (including written records of the past, physical remains and social and cultural rituals). Unlike most writing in the humanities, its central move is from the sensory or spatio-visual to the verbal.

¹ Nemerov, The Art of Description, 5.
COMMON TYPES OF ART HISTORY ASSIGNMENTS

Here are four types of the most common writing assignments in Art History courses. Like a telescope, each assignment extends from the previous one, reframing the relationship between reader, art and writer (the writer being the one who experiences the work analytically, physically, socially, affectively, etc.). The more you approach the various genres of writing in Art History as responsive to specific situations and expectations, the more effective your writing can become.

I. OBJECT LABEL

This writing appears alongside artworks on display at a museum and is meant to increase visitors’ understanding. It can provide visitors with a context or frame of reference for approaching a work or engage visitors by guiding their attention to points of interest within the work. Labels should be no more than 50 words, written in an accessible style and compel the visitor to look back to the work rather than walk on.

i. Organization and Content

An object label should provide, at a minimum, short factual information about the object and its creation. This includes categories such as:

- What it is
- Where, when and by whom it was made (on second reference, always refer to the artist by last name)
- The materials and techniques used to make it
- Any inscriptions on it

Writing the sentences that follow can be quite challenging as you confront an array of facts and values alongside the need to distil and select. To help with this process, define the objectives of the exhibit and its target audience. Then draw on the following stylistic suggestions to engage the visitor:

- Address the visitor in the first person
- Use active voice and relatively short sentences
- Provide familiar points of comparison
- Ask questions that compel the visitor to look again, look closely, reconsider
- Put the most important idea first.
ii. Example

Here is an example of an object label in the Anderson Collection:

Willem de Kooning was an action painter and central artist in the New York School. The artist's pink women are statuesque, made of broad brushstrokes and saturated colors. Picasso’s *Les Desmoiselles D’Avignon* seems present in the angular lines and geometric nose and legs of *Woman Standing – Pink*, though de Kooning denied any influence of cubism on his work. Willem de Kooning described his drawing process as guided by a sense of intuition. He made his drawings of women, not unlike *Woman Standing – Pink*, with his eyes closed.

This object label for the de Kooning might surprise you. The image looks frightening, monstrous, powerful. It can provoke strong feelings in students: misperceived as a woman, uncomfortable with the angular breasts and wayward eye, uncertain if this figure is violent or silenced or both. The object label doesn’t address these possible responses, however. Instead it situates the painting in its art historical context, placing it in relation to other artists, artworks and movements. The label also speaks to the fairly unique conditions of its production, encouraging viewers to turn back to the painting in a way that differs from and perhaps even challenges an initial viewing. All without telling you how this writer feels before the work or how you, as a reader/museum visitor might be feeling.

For more examples of Object Labels at the Anderson, you can visit the Anderson Collection website.
II. CATALOGUE ENTRY

This genre of writing appears in an exhibit catalogue alongside a reproduction of the object. It is written for a general audience and can be distinguished from the catalogue raisonée, which is written for specialists (art historians, dealers and collectors). To engage the non-specialist reader, present your scholarship in a way that is both accessible and engaging. Include technical terms only when necessary and define them when you do. Entry assignments tend to ask for 2-3 paragraphs, but be sure to consult with your professor for page length.

Although a catalogue entry begins much like an object label, the writing that follows differs in several key ways. If the object label asks you to imagine a visitor in the museum, the catalogue entry asks you to imagine a reader of a catalogue. To engage the latter, you will want to provide more scholarship, aim for a more formal style and situate your work more clearly within the context of the catalogue. To begin, then, ascertain or imagine the thematic focus of the catalogue. Depending on your object, the catalogue might be focused on a particular artist, a school or group of artists, a theme or a genre.

i. Organization and Content

A typical catalogue entry begins with the following information:

The artist’s name and dates, title of the work (or brief description if untitled), material, dimensions, condition and owner, and bibliographic material (references to relevant publications).

Your catalogue entry will then want to explain the significance of your particular work both for the artist’s oeuvre and for the exhibit itself—thus imagining your entry as one among many others. You might begin at the beginning: with a description of the subject, the technique of manufacture (if the work is not a painting) and the conditions of production (who it was for and whether it is part of a group). Then discuss the work and its dimensions of interest by asking questions about provenance or exhibition history or, in a connoisseural way, about the work’s quality or attribution. Or you might make comparisons to other works by the artist or to related works (is it traditional, innovative?). Catalogue entries often conclude with a brief bibliography, citing relevant scholarship along with other exhibition catalogues that have included the work.
Example

Here is Professor Richard Meyer’s catalogue entry for a work displayed in Warhol’s Jews: Ten Portraits Reconsidered, an exhibit he guest curated in 2008.

Religious philosopher Martin Buber (1878 -1965) studied at universities in Vienna, Berlin, Leipzig, and Zurich. At the University of Leipzig in 1900, Buber became interested in Theodor Herzl’s Zionist movement, and in 1901 he was invited by Herzl to become editor of the Zionist weekly Die Welt (The World). In 1923, Buber published his major thesis Ich und Du (I and Thou), which described his philosophy of dialogue, centering on the encounter of man with other human beings and ultimately leading to a relation with God. This emphasis on dialogue encouraged open discourse with Christian theologians, building important connections between Judaism and Christianity. Buber left Germany in the mid-1930’s when the Nazis condemned his public lectures and adult education programs. He emigrated to Palestine and was appointed professor of social philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and later continued his adult education programs.

With his long gray beard, Buber embodied the common image of a biblical prophet. Warhol’s print dealer, Ronald Feldman, recalled that Buber resembled Moses to the artist. Indeed, the line drawing used in Warhol’s portrait of Buber accentuates the philosopher’s beard while delineating only a cursory outline of his facial features. The source photograph was taken by German portrait photographer Tita Binz in the late 1950’s or early 1960’s.
This entry is striking for its accessibility. It provides historical context through a brief biography and follows with three points of significance: iconography, technique, and the role of the original.

To understand how the entry develops out of the larger exhibit, it can help to turn to the catalogue’s opening essay. Here, Meyer raises and responds to a “fresh set of questions” for Ten Portraits. Why, to begin, did Warhol choose these Jews? Turning at one point to the portrait of Buber, Meyer explains that Warhol’s choice of Buber had less to do with Buber’s historical significance and more to do with his visual resemblance to a much earlier and more famous Jew [Moses]. Still, Buber remains valuable as a subject. Meyer goes on to speak to the pedagogical value of Warhol’s Ten Portraits. When we encounter these faces and names (especially unfamiliar ones such as Buber’s), we are compelled to learn more about the Jewish men and women they represent. Meyer’s essay then transcends these explorations and ultimately raises the question of intentionality in Ten Portraits, imagining them not as a “desire to represent the biographical achievement or historical complexity of his ten Jewish subjects but as a visual and material engagement with their photographic images.” In support of this argument, Meyer flanks each entry with additional images. Alongside the screen print of Buber, for example, Meyer provides the original photo by Binz and a clipping Warhol would have seen of Buber, from a 1965 Life magazine.

In conclusion, Meyer’s catalogue entry can be seen to provide the reader with a more informative visual and textual history than the object label. Even as the catalogue entry is easily accessible in its language and style, it touches on the central concerns of the exhibit: the portraits’ pedagogical potential, Warhol’s reasons for choosing certain individuals over others and the significance of these portraits as works of art—particularly in relation to the original photographs.
III. FORMAL ANALYSIS

Dear Deem: the unfinished poster is the most distinguished American painting I have seen in years. I enjoy it for five or six distinct reasons, color, composition, clarity, thought, emotional force, ingenuity—and its completeness. Well it’s very satisfying to me and I congratulate you.

William Carlos Williams, Letter to Charles Demuth (1928)

This assignment asks you to explore a work’s formal qualities in a sustained, analytical way. The practice of describing a work’s subject matter, and the way its subject matter is formally realized, will prove foundational to the research essay.

Unlike an object label or catalogue entry, which situates an artwork among others, a formal analysis focuses on a single work of art, in and of itself. As the writer of a formal analysis, then, you play a more significant role as you create the context for the work and determine its most significant features—without the framing influence of an exhibit. Your readers change here as well; you can assume an academic audience.

i. Selecting A Piece for Study

Your professor may assign an artwork to study, but often you are free to choose yourself. How to choose may seem obvious, but it bears noting that the artwork that echoes your beliefs or that feels familiar or “easy” to write about does not always make for the best essay. As Roland Barthes writes in Camera Lucida, an ode to photography and to his mother, we write best when we engage not the ‘studium’—a work’s political and cultural denotation (which compels only polite interest), but the ‘punctum’—the wounding, puncturing detail from which we cannot turn away.

Like any new relationship, once you’ve chosen a work of art, you’ll want to spend time with it (at least 30 minutes). In addition to taking notes while you look, try drawing what you see. Even if you feel awkward as an artist, the exercise of looking and copying can generate a new level of intimacy and insight. Then free-write about the work’s most significant elements.

Note: A work’s elements may be in tension with each other; this is ok. By allowing for complexity in your thinking and writing, you tend to let the work speak for itself—as compared to imposing order or sameness onto it.

Then write an essay that describes key formal elements as a way to better understand the composition. (It’s important to remember that this assignment is not asking you to list all that you see. Rather, “you’re trying to see how far you can interpret the image without consulting outside sources.”2)

2 D’Alleva, How To Write Art History, 76.
ii. Organization and Content

While a formal analysis begins with the information found in an object label, you will want to expand upon that information. For example:

1. Date: Is it a copy of something older; does it fit within a tradition of similar works?
2. Provenance: Who was it made for and is it typical of art from this city/region?
3. Spatiality: Can it be viewed from multiple perspectives, from above, below?
4. Materiality: What materials is it made of and how was it made?

Following this introduction, you’ll want to provide the reader with a brief description of the work, as a whole, and then follow it with a study of the work’s formal qualities relative to the composition. By considering where your artwork falls on a sliding scale of opposite qualities, you can describe it with greater specificity.

Consider, for example, these formal qualities:

**Colors:** What hues does your artist use and in what range [primary: red, blue, yellow; or secondary: violet, orange, green]? Are the colors highly saturated (at their most vivid) or low saturated (hard to distinguish)? Is there a wide or narrow range of colors? Do they contrast or blend? Do the colors create an emotional affect? Are they used for emphasis?

**Line:** Does the work emphasize lines (linearity) or the play of light (contours)? Can you see the marks of the tools—pencil, brush, burin (steel tool for engraving copper or wood)? Does the work seem highly finished or rough and unfinished? How do these qualities contribute to the work’s effect?

**Space and Mass:** How is space conveyed in this work: is it recessed or flat? Does the work convey a sense of mass or lightness?

**Scale:** What is the size of the work, in and of itself and in relation to you, the viewer? Where is it on the scale of monumental to miniature? Are different scales used to emphasize different components/figures?

Other elements to consider are balance (symmetry/asymmetry), emphasis and subordination, unity and variety, rhythm (ordering of the elements) and function/siting and interior/exterior.

*NB:* As you approach a work, it is important to determine if you are experiencing it as it was meant to be experienced. Archival research will help you answer this question and construct a formal analysis that takes any visual or physical differences in the present into account.
iii. Example

The following excerpt provides a formal analysis of Max Yavno’s (U.S.A., 1921-1985), *Muscle Beach*, 1949. The writer, Stanford graduate student Sarah Naftalis, begins her essay by recreating the historical moment of this photo. She describes Yavno as a photographer, surveying the raucous beach. She then introduces “Riders in the Sky,” the number one hit song that summer—a song that played on the bright crowded beaches even as it told a ballad of gloom and haunting. Naftalis then arrives at the photograph itself:

Yavno’s *Muscle Beach* (1949) captures a moment between up and down, that hold-your-breath pause felt at the top of the roller coaster’s crest. At the center foreground of the photograph, a man and a woman take in the scene, marveling at the ephemeral ascents of the athletes before them. Turned away from us, the couple stands slightly apart from the crowd of regulars. He, with his tiki-print shorts and a soft back not quite sufficiently ‘cut’ by Muscle Beach standards, rests his hand on her hip; she keeps her arms folded out of sight. It’s noisy here, noisy with music blared and with compact bodies—an aural and visual racket that teases the “Silent Leo’s” sign overlooking the commotion. There must be a hundred people at least, stained with the sun’s temporary tattoo. Look at the dumbfounding density: shoulder blades and spinal valleys, craned necks beneath Panama hats and sunglasses, Hawaiian shirts and striped dresses and too-tight short-shorts. There is almost no empty space here, unless you count the patches of sand, kicked up by the hooves of strongmen, strong-women and their trackers. They nearly dissolve into an undifferentiated black-and-white buzz.

Always counterbalancing the vitality and energy of what she describes with a bass note of imminent endings, Naftalis moves across the image, focusing on the suspended, temporary quality of its bodies. This description arguably works so well because this writer has identified a central theme, out of her close looking. As she concludes: “What had been essential to 1949 will be turned over, exchanged, and made obsolete...But here, now, in this frame, the bodies flex and soar with no mind to their descent.” Life and lift and flight and strength are her central axes of analysis. She adds tension to her analysis by noting that these central tropes hold their ending, their collapse, within them. What comes up must come down. By exposing and sustaining this tension in her writing, the writer makes her analysis—and by extension the image itself—that much more dynamic, unified, urgent.
IV. RESEARCH ESSAY

While this assignment may seem daunting, it builds incrementally on the skills developed in earlier types of assignments. For example, once you are familiar with the formal analysis essay, adding research will likely prove satisfying as you test out your hypotheses, seek out the logic of aesthetic choices, engage other critics, discover conversations and populate the world around this object, bringing it to greater life. This process might also be likened to mapping, as you chart the terrain of your object, find a path that interests you and stake your place in the field.

As with a formal analysis, you can assume your readers are academics. Unlike the formal analysis, though, you will be engaging academic research. This means you will be ‘speaking’ with specific scholars in your essay. With the research essay, then, you will want to develop a voice in dialogue with others. Some questions to consider as you explore the relationship between yourself, scholars and readers: How would you speak to a fellow scholar if you were face to face with him/her? Can you read others’ arguments in a way that is at once generous and critical? How do you broach disagreement? Can you strike out on your own as a thinker? What tone of voice will you take (assertive, skeptical, curious, fascinated, judgmental)—and to what end?

RESEARCH

Research is a skill and, like any skill, it improves with time and practice. While the most intuitive method for learning about a work of art may be to search the web (given its instant gratification), this can yield scattered and unreliable results. When you are asked to research a work of art, you are being asked to research as an academic scholar. So avail yourself of the important collections housed in the Cantor Museum and the Anderson Collection, print the Stanford Arts Map and explore the art and architecture treasures on campus, take the train to San Francisco and discover its arts scene, celebrated architecture and theaters. Not least, see for yourself the breadth of the Bowes Art and Architecture Library and access Stanford’s extensive databases—waiting for you there is the aesthetic and historical context of an artwork (political, religious, cultural, economic, material production) along with critical debates to join and scholarly bibliographies to mine.
Research Guide
To help you with your research, the Art and Art History librarians have created an online guide for you. To access the guide, go to the Library Home Page. Click on Research Support, then Topic Guides, then “Art History: beginning research.”

The guide includes but is not limited to:
• How to begin researching a work of art
• How to cite works of art
• How to find information about works in the Cantor/Anderson
• Call numbers and abstracts to writing guides in Art History
• A list of helpful Art History databases
• Introductory and subject-specific surveys

Databases
To search for images, journal articles, scholarly bibliographies, and historical documents, you will want to turn to the Stanford databases. Three of the most helpful Art databases are:

**ARTSTOR**
Searchable database of more than 300,000 images. Users can view and analyze images through features such as zooming and panning. Unlike Google image search, this database allows you to zoom into works to study them in detail.

**JSTOR**
Provides full text articles from core scholarly journals from the earliest issues to within a few years of current publication. Users may browse by journal title or discipline, or may search the full-text or citations/abstracts. New issues of existing titles and new titles are added approximately on a weekly basis.

**ART FULL TEXT**
A bibliographic database that indexes and abstracts articles on art and related disciplines from periodicals, yearbooks, and museum bulletins published throughout the world. There is full-text coverage for selected periodicals. In addition to articles, Art Full Text indexes reproductions of works of art that appear in indexed periodicals.

**HISTORICAL ABSTRACTS** is another valuable database for art historical research, though not on the library guide
HA covers the history of the world (excluding the United States and Canada) from 1450 to the present, full text of more than 300 journals and over 130 books.

NB: All 1300 Stanford databases can be accessed via the Library Homepage. In the Search Everything box, there is a link at the bottom to “Databases.”
A Note about WRITING Guides in Art History

There are many but Sylvan Barnet’s Short Guide to Writing arguably offers the most complete and straightforward introduction to writing in the field. His book need not be read cover to cover but can be mined for topical assistance.

i. Developing Ideas and Questions from Research

What happens when you begin to research a work of art through the Stanford libraries?

1. You will find that what you thought has already been argued
2. You will find that what you thought has been argued against
3. You will find that what you thought has never been argued

While each may seem rich with promise and despair, all offer a valuable starting point for writing. In the first case, the challenge will be to avoid restating another’s arguments. You might, instead, build on what has already been said by adding further details, new significance, further context. You might even find new points of tension with other works or within that work. In the second case, you might bring your argument into dialogue with the counter-argument, finding a synthesis between them. In the third case, you have a valuable opportunity to not only present a new idea but also imagine why your idea hasn’t been expressed.

ii. Primary vs. Secondary Sources

No writing process is perfectly linear. As you read and look, write down the questions that come to mind and take notes. One thing is certain: we discover new ideas as we write. So begin your writing soon and often. It will help give specificity and direction to your thinking.

Your intuition may be to start with journal articles and books that echo your thesis--and then alternately worry and wonder if you should change topics if you cannot find these. Beginning with secondary materials, however, can often interfere with (if not drown out) your own insights. (Secondary sources are so called because they interpret and are at one remove from the work of art).
It behooves you, then, to begin your research instead with primary sources, sources that give you direct access to the work of art itself (its period, provenance, purpose...). Some examples of primary sources are: other works by the artist, similar works by different artists working in the same period, year or region; artist biographies, diaries, letters, historical documents. These sources can provide a rich nexus of ideas from which to develop your own questions and observations, connections and tensions.

After you’ve followed this path of research, then turn to secondary sources. You may want to begin by reading humbly to understand completely and without judgment another’s argument. Then, re-read your key sources critically—that is, with an eye and an ear to the way you can develop the ideas already presented. Given your work with primary sources, what claims might you build on and take farther, or problematize and reimagine.

Finally, when reading other art historians’ arguments, observe the conventions of the discourse community. Ask and examine as you read: How are these paragraphs or this entire argument structured? How does this scholar present evidence? How does she move from research to conclusion? Engaging scholarship in this way is crucial to learning the practice of Art History.

iv. Organization: Types of Research Essays:
Once you have taken these steps, begin writing the essay. There are many ways of structuring an essay but for the purposes of this assignment, they can be broken down into two types: the thesis-driven essay and, the more advanced, problem-driven essay. Check with your professor to see if they have a preference, otherwise choose the essay that best matches your skill level.

Thesis-Driven Essay
A thesis-driven essay most often provides a thesis in the introductory paragraph. A thesis offers an argument that can be debated (as opposed to a statement that can be universally agreed upon). In the paragraphs following the thesis, you will want to provide specific research and formal analyses that support it. The conclusion can: point to the significance of your claims, offer suggestions for further research, provide further questions.

Note: Be wary of deciding on a thesis too soon in your research process as it will cause you to “cherry pick” your evidence and produce a biased argument. Instead, be open to discovering new evidence that may compel you to reassess and revise your thesis.
Problem-Driven Essay

A problem-driven essay will begin with a motivating hypothesis or research question.

The Research Question

An effective hypothesis/research question moves beyond stating a fact or observation to raise a question about facts or observations, usually by asking: “How can we make better sense of this object in its moment?” Your question should be the clear product of concrete research and should be specific and focused—thus indicating to your reader the emphasis and scope of the essay. Structurally, the research question might develop out of the context provided in the paper’s introduction, an introduction that also hints toward the larger relevance of the question.

Importantly, an effective research question/hypothesis develops over time and across many drafts, from the essay’s first imagining to revision.

Examples of Research Questions

1. This first is taken from Stanford Professor Alexander Nemerov’s essay, “Groundswell: Edward Hopper in 1939.”

“How do we return Hopper to history? The process is difficult, since Hopper worked hard to defeat any obvious sense in which his pictures are about any particular topic. Yet it is possible to connect Hopper’s Ground Swell, an enigmatic picture of 1939, to political and cultural developments of that year.”

Edward Hopper, Ground Swell, 1939. Oil, 36 ½ x 50 ¼ in. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Museum Purchase, William A. Clark Fund

While the last sentence here is a kind of thesis, it doesn’t answer the opening question. That will be the work of the essay.
2. Take a look at this more implicit question, from Stanford Professor Bissrea Pentcheva’s essay “Visual Textuality: ‘The Logos’ as Pregnant Body and Building.”

“Logos in Byzantine culture has multiple meanings; it can signify a word, writing, divine utterance, commandment, law, sermon and literature. In theological terms, Christ is the divine Logos, who descends and receives flesh in the womb of the Virgin. This article sets out to explore how both the theological and philological meanings of Logos are engaged in the frontispiece of the mid-twelfth-century manuscript of the liturgical edition of the sermons of Gregory of Nazianzos, Sinai Cod. Gr. 339, fol. 4v.”

Sinai Cod. Gr. 339, fol. 4v, the preface miniature showing the author of the Homilies, Gregory of Nazianzos, ca. 1142 (Photo: Princeton-Michigan Expedition, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor).

Again, the opening sentence looks like a thesis but is actually a research statement. The next sentence sets out the challenge of the essay. (A thesis-driven essay might, on the other hand, make the claim that the frontispiece expresses one particular meaning of Logos and then, in the following paragraphs, go on to show what that is and why.

3. And finally, Stanford Professor Fabio Barry’s introduction to “The Mouth of Truth and the Forum Boarium: Oceanus, Hercules, and Hadrian” where he exposes an irony and paradox at the heart of his object:

“It is an enduring irony that the myth continues to prosper, because while the Bocca [della Verità] condemns the lies of others, it refuses to disclose its own secret. Over the past three centuries, antiquaries and archaeologists dissatisfied with Roman folklore have attempted to identify the Bocca as Jupiter Ammon, Faunus, Mercury, the river god Acheloös, the Nile, the Tiber, Triton, and others, even a man-eating lion totem from Asia Minor. Yet no candidate has won consensus, and all attempts to reconcile any of these identities with the legend of the lie detector have proven equally fruitless. In the final estimation, despite its worldwide fame, we know next to nothing about the ‘Mouth of Truth.’”

Bocca della Verità, ca 177-38 CE, Phrygian marble, diameter approx. 69 in. (175 cm) (artwork in the public domain)
Each of these paragraphs (note they are paragraphs, rather than single sentences) explains how elements central to an art object are surprising, unexpected, multiple and unresolved; how they are in tension with each other--with other works by this artist, with what the artist has claimed, with past research. And because of this, the writer has to write. The essay that follows these questions needs to be written: in order to explain what this surprise is, what this tension is, what about these artworks is unexpected. The writing to come will lead us back to the art by pointing out what isn’t obvious, by questioning what we assumed, by pointing us to a mystery.

ii. Beginning without a thesis

To begin, your essay will need to acknowledge artworks as enigmatic, complicated, complex—even as you use your writing and research to arrive at a nuanced conclusion about them.

This approach, beginning with a problem or question and attempting to move ultimately towards greater clarity, takes you closer towards achieving what Montaigne, the father of the essay, gave as his motto: “What do I know?” The essay as he writes it and writes about it, is a place inviting contradiction, paradox, irresolution and self-doubt. To write essayistically, then, is to seek out a better understanding of your artwork, even while acknowledging its complexity, or your ambivalence about it.

Nemerov captures this approach to writing in his essay on Hopper:

“Rather than ‘solving’ the picture, as though it were a code to be cracked, the aim of such analysis is to open the painting up…In writing about Ground Swell I do not want to solve the clues and reduce the painting to an explanation, placing the work in the kind of taxonomic box Hopper shuddered at. Instead, I am trying to get at precisely the mystery, the questions, the work itself wonders about…”

iii. Paragraphs

Strive for paragraphs that add to, rethink, transcend or problematize what came before. To begin, aim to write a topic sentence that clearly sets out the argument of that paragraph. A reader should be able to read the first sentence of each paragraph, and nothing else, and still get a sense for the paper’s logical development. Because topic sentences lay out your approach, they rarely contain quotations. Better to make your position in the conversation clear and your voice heard. As each paragraph provides research and your analysis of that research, the concluding sentence can then reach for more nuanced questions about your object and/or more complex accounts of it. (While it can be tempting to end your paragraphs with the facts of your research,
this makes for a tough entry into the next paragraph. Instead, imagine the end of each paragraph as an opportunity to show your analytical skills: what do you make of the research you’ve just provided? What is its significance relative to the research question? Why can’t the essay end here?)

iv. Footnotes. Citation
An editor at an important journal once explained: by simply reading the footnotes, he could determine which essays to publish and which to reject. While this may seem like choosing a lover based on a big toe, it’s not as peculiar as it sounds. The footnotes document research you have quoted, paraphrased or summarized in the body of your essay as well as any ideas you’ve borrowed and expressed in the essay.

A reader might look at your footnotes, then, and find the answer to these questions: Has this writer read the most important critics on the topic? Has the writer engaged relevant theoretical perspectives? Has the writer relied on scholarly research as compared to internet searches? Has the writer balanced primary and secondary materials?

Your footnotes reveal, in this way, what kind of researcher you are: perfunctory, multilingual, creative, interdisciplinary, reliable... By asking these questions of your own footnotes, you stand to improve both your footnotes and your essay.

Note: You can also use the space of a footnote to provide your reader with salient additional research, as well as anecdotal or other observations that enhance the reader’s understanding of the subject--even as such asides remain ancillary to the essay’s structure.

For proper citation, refer to the detailed instructions in the Library Guide. Art Historians use the style established by the Chicago Manual of Style.

v. Organization-Arrangement
To determine an effective structure for your argument, it can be helpful to ask what your reader needs to know, first, in order to understand the point you want to make. What elements and source documents are salient, indeed necessary, for this argument, in particular? You can also conceptualize your essay as a story: with a beginning (that marks out assumptions), a pivot point (showing new research or analysis that problematizes those assumptions), consequences (significance of this research/analysis for a particular work and/or the discipline), and a conclusion (broader significance; what questions remain)?

You will also want to think about how to strategically distribute primary and secondary literature across your argument. Primary sources will likely appear throughout your
paper to support your claims about an artwork. Arrange your discussion of the primary sources to persuade your reader of what you see. If you choose a thematic approach to organization (which many professors value), you will want to think about how your organization can help your reader learn as the essay unfolds. With this goal in mind, it’s best to move from more familiar to less familiar examples and from less complex to more complex discussions.

vi. Drawing conclusions

Introductions are often motivated by questions. In your conclusion, you make the motive for your ultimate insights explicit. After you have provided a compact summary of your argument in the conclusion (which might involve new more focused questions), a prominent sentence should finish a version of this statement: “My argument matters because . . .”

For example, an argument might have important conceptual consequences and these can be elaborated in the conclusion. You can make this explicit in your conclusion as you explore the ramifications of your analysis for key concepts and practices. In other words, how has your argument engaged with our understanding of art?

vii. Revision

Art history that is worth reading has been revised many times. When we write a first draft of a paper, we are usually writing to explain something to ourselves. When we revise it, we orient our writing to a reader, a specific audience whose needs and expectations prioritize our revisions. To get a sense for what your audience wants to read, make a study of previously successful sample essays or published arguments in journals you and/or your professor/TA admires.

It’s best to leave some time between finishing your first draft and returning to revise it. This gap in time will help you view your writing more dispassionately. Then ask yourself:

- Have I said what I wanted to say?
- Have I said something worth saying?
- Will a reader understand what I am saying?

To help you understand how well your writing communicates, it’s vital to get feedback from readers. Consider asking a peer or a Hume Center tutor or the Art History Writing Specialist to help you assess what works – and what could use improvement – in your writing.
As you assess your first draft critically, seek out the following virtues:

- **Unity**: Do all my paragraphs elaborate on my research question? If not, what can I remove or make more relevant? What do I need to add to provide a more honest picture of my subject?
- **Cohesion**: Does each paragraph end with a sentence that tells the reader the significance of what comes before it? What new questions are raised and what new writing/thinking needs to happen? You can also ask yourself at the end of each paragraph: why can’t I end here? Does the first sentence of the paragraph clearly develop out of the thinking that immediately precedes it?
- **Concision**: Does every word matter? Have I been as precise as I can be?

vii. **First Person**

“If we define art as part of the realm of experience, we can assume that after a viewer looks at a piece he ‘leaves’ with the art, because the ‘art’ had been experienced.” - James Turrell, *The Art and Technology Project of LACMA*

Often, professors will caution against, if not disallow, the use of first person. Because this grammatical rule seems to deny our deeply personal encounter with art, it can be a troubling interdict for students in Art History. What’s going on here?

When first person accounts take the place of research, it weakens an argument. Take for example, this first-person description of the image to the left: “Looking at Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits, I feel like the instruments of torture are merely props; I don’t see or feel like she’s really in pain. Her portraits are disingenuous.” Although framed as an argument, it is really an intuition.

While it is an important intuition, it works better as a starting point than as a thesis. The student has, keenly, sensed a disconnect or tension in the image. She might begin, then, by describing Kahlo’s placid features (which is where we expect to see an expression of pain) and contrast her features with the specific torments displayed in her portraits (bleeding heart, arrows, crown of thorns). The student might then look for
works that share Kahlo’s iconography to see how other artists depict tortured bodies. In the process, she might notice that Christian images depicting martyrdom and crucifixion often display a similar disconnect between the face and the suffering body.

The essay might evolve from here. In sum, by pointing to specific details and showing how they lead to certain hypotheses, the student provides her readers with reasons, other than herself, for her claims. First person anecdotes can have their place in academic writing, then, as long as they’re not serving as evidence for a claim.

**COMPARE/CONTRAST ESSAY**


Emperor Qianlong *In a Monk Robe*, 1735-95. Pigment, 46 in x 27 in. The Palace Museum, Beijing.

The assignment to compare/contrast multiple works of art is a particular type of research essay; it can be written either as a thesis- or problem-driven essay. Its purpose is to show how one or both works reveal themselves in new and important ways when viewed alongside the other.
One of the most challenging aspects of this essay can be structural. Students regularly wonder: How do I write about two pieces, equally, at the same time? Do I tack from one to the other, within each paragraph or from one paragraph to another? Or do I dedicate equal but separate pages to each work? Sylvan Barnet, in his Guide to Writing About Art, recommends (with good reason) that we attempt a modified version of the latter: (1) identifying key point(s) of comparison and contrast (2) formulating a driving question or thesis (3) engaging with one work at length and then engaging with the other at length.

To achieve this structure, you need not create a perfect symmetry of pages or even impose a division between sections. You may find, for example, that certain elements demand more writing than others: the cut of a woman’s dress, the limbs in a bas-relief, a musical number, an atrium. And in the second section, you will want to recall your reader to points made in the first. Whatever structure you choose, the reader is looking to see how these works depend on and challenge each other in a persuasive, sustained way.

**LANGUAGE**

“I would call Jasper Johns a metaphysical artist, in the way that the 17th-century English poet John Donne is a metaphysical poet. Like Donne’s poetry, Johns’s art is equally about body and mind, sensuality and reflection. It is unmystical, unromantic, unnostalgic but obsessed with transcendence and the reality of loss.”

Your ability to make us see, to lead us back to the work of art comes as much from your comparisons, your close looking, your historical research and your well-structured essay as it comes from your particular word choice. To bring your writing alive means to write as much as a scholar as a poet. A poet, not in the sense of crafting rhymes or adopting a poetic form, but in the sense of finding a language so true to your object, a reader comes to see that object as though for the first time. What had been otherwise inert or even buried, breathes. Discovering that language, that common dream, is no easy task. But it’s this that makes art and the best writing about it.
Bibliography


