

Writing an Art History Essay

An **essay** is a short literary composition on a single topic that presents the views of the author. The French writer Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) first popularized the form in his 1580 book *Essais*, which collected his thoughts on historical, philosophical, personal, and cultural matters. The French word “essai,” from which “essay” is derived, literally translates to “attempt” or “trial.” Montaigne thought the essay was a way to try to structure his thoughts in a meaningful, organized way, and each “essai” contains a specific claim about human nature and utilizes historical sources (such as ancient poets like Homer and ancient Greek and Roman philosophers) to strengthen his argument.

At the college level, writers largely produce essays and not reports. A report is a mere collection of facts. If I asked you to write a book report, you’d tell me who wrote it, what the plot of the book is, who the characters are, how it ends, etc.—basically any of the factual elements about the book that prove that you have read it. If I asked you to write a report about Franklin Delano Roosevelt, you’d tell me he was the 32nd president of the United States; that he served from 1933-1945; that he spearheaded help for the Great Depression and World War II; that he had polio as a young man, which left him largely bound to a wheel chair as an adult; that he was born in 1882; and so on and so on—all objective facts that wouldn’t change between anyone’s report.

An essay, however, makes an *argument*—your argument, to be exact. An essay contains a central claim that you believe and allows you to demonstrate to the reader why such a belief is correct or at least logical by using facts and evidence and examples. Essays show a writer’s mind on the page, which is why it is a popular form of assessment in college-level coursework.

Argument seems at first like the audience and the writer are fighting over something—not necessarily so. While it is possible to argue over something very controversial (whether the death penalty should be abolished, for instance), arguments are more traditionally defined as a claim supported by reasons. Anything that can be a claim (e.g., an interpretation about the meaning of a work of art) can be at heart of an essay.

Most writing in art history involves formal analysis of at least one work of art. In other words, a student builds an interpretation (an argument) about an artwork and uses observations of that artwork to support her or his interpretation. For example, if I interpret a particular painting to mean that humans are becoming more and more isolated from each other as technology continues to advance, I will need to point to specific elements inside that painting that have led me to that interpretation. Because interpretations are claims, we might disagree what a painting actually means; that’s okay! The strength of an analysis is how well the writer can find evidence (observations) to support his or her view.

At its most basic level, analysis is a kind of critical reading. Analysis is a common academic assignment because it encourages critical reading, necessitates critical thinking, and demonstrates to a professor that you have engaged with a text on its concrete level (the actual text itself) and its abstract level (“reading between the lines,” conceptualizing the author’s intentions).

It is also a widely popular assignment because people use analysis every day; perhaps they don’t use it in the same sense that a college requires its students to use it, but people examine, debate, select, and problem-solve each day. By weighing consequences and looking at the larger, deeper, more complete picture of something, a person is conducting analysis.

One popular topic for analysis is art. Think of the film *The Godfather* (1972). You’ve probably seen it. It’s widely considered to be one of the greatest films ever made, but why? Most people might say that it’s a “package deal”—meaning the film as a whole is simply great. But a critical reader knows something with so

many pieces, such as a film, can't just be great "as a whole" and leave it that. There are elements inside the film that contribute to its greatness. The goal of analysis is to identify what those elements are and explain why those elements make the film great.



Let's say you've been asked to write an analysis of *The Godfather* in which you discuss the relationship between business and family. To do this, we have to watch the movie very carefully and pick out all of the moments about business and family; then we add up these moments and determine what they mean.

So, *The Godfather* sets up two very different "families"—the biological family (the blood-related Corleones) and the business family (The Corleone Family as a criminal syndicate). Those are related in important scenes, such as Vito taking requests at his daughter's wedding and Michael's final orchestration during his son's christening. Then the film sets up a relationship between a father (Vito) and his sons (Sonny, Fredo, and Michael). Vito is in many ways the film's hero; he's noble, balanced, reasonable, practical, but cutthroat when needed. He has a good balance of family and business. Sonny is so wildly imbalanced toward family that he can't run the business; Fredo is so focused on business success that he forfeits obligations to his biological family. Michael seems at first to have the same balance his father does, but the film suggests a darker current running through Michael, who won't be able to balance it like his father and whose downfall will be tragic. And once you have the examples, you can draw a conclusion as to what they mean:

The Godfather illustrates that finding a balance between business and family is crucially important, but only Vito Corleone seems to understand how to find this balance, as all three of his sons fail to live up to his example.

This interpretation you reach is called your **thesis statement**, and it belongs at the start of your analysis paper. You want to let the reader know as early as possible what your interpretation is and how you're going to support it. The thesis statement here suggests that after a little bit of analysis, the story of *The Godfather*—in addition to being a really awesome movie—actually seems to mean something on a more complex level. We can appreciate the film in a deeper way, and that's what analysis is really all about.

Often, art history papers will ask you to compare and contrast more than one artwork in formal or iconographic analysis. *Formal* here doesn't mean elegant or fancy, but rather concerned with form—line, color, texture, space; *iconography* refers to the way particular artworks use symbols and what those symbols mean. (An example of iconography would be a painting that depicts a naked woman in a garden with an apple and a snake. This is clearly a reference to Eve in the Genesis creation myth.)

When you attempt to build a thesis statement that compares and contrasts works of art, there are two basic templates:

The Unexpected Similarity. This type of interpretation says that while two (or more) artworks don't appear to have a lot in common, they actually share an unexpected and important similarity that the paper will bring to the surface for the reader to appreciate. For example: *While X and Y are from different geographic regions and different eras of history, they both showcase the role that gender plays in...*

The Important Difference. This type of interpretation says that while two (or more) artworks appear to have a lot in common, they actually possess an important difference that the paper will bring to the surface for the reader to appreciate. For example: *While it may seem that X and Y each possess qualities associated with the Byzantium period, they actually possess an important difference in the way they...*

TIPS AND TRICKS

Here are some basic tips for writing a good art history paper. Remember that you can always consult a tutoring lab or your professor in order to answer additional questions you may have.

- An analysis not merely description. Every time you describe something about the artwork in the body of the essay, you should explain why that particular aspect is noteworthy. This is the distinction between the WHAT and the WHY: *what* did you notice about the artwork, and *why* is it important?
- An academic paper needs structure. Move from discussing larger elements (such as the effect of the composition of a work) to discussing the specific details (such as the effect of the brushstrokes).
- Each paragraph should be *about* something specific and not consist of mere observations.
- Use the introduction to give a brief description and overview of the works. Assume your reader is educated and open to your interpretation, but do not take it for granted that your reader is intimately familiar with the work. A good test to tell if you've described something well enough is to imagine giving a friend your written analysis and determining whether she or he would be able to sketch the artwork briefly or pick it out of a line-up.
- Introductory paragraphs should include the name of the work, the title, the subject, the artist's full name, the date, the period, the country. Mention any other relevant materials.
- After the first reference to the artist by his or her full name, you may refer to the artist by his or her last name (e.g., *Vincent Van Gogh* becomes *Van Gogh*).
- Always consider how each element of an artwork contributes to the overall meaning. What effect is created when all the elements are considered together?
- Contextualize the image within a historical or cultural framework only when required. (Some assignments prefer you don't. Work with your professor to determine when is the right time to do so.)
- If you are writing an analysis that compares and contrasts multiple works, do not merely describe one work, then the next work, then the final work. This style—known as “block-by-block”—often leads to a lot of description but not a lot of analysis. Instead, structure your paper in what is known as the “point-by-point” method. In this method, you identify points of comparison and contrast and allow those points to be the main ideas; as you support those main ideas, you'll discuss the works. The ultimate outline would appear something like this:
 - §1: Point of Similarity
 - ¶: Work A
 - ¶: Work B
 - ¶: Work C
 - §2: Point of Similarity
 - ¶: Work A
 - ¶: Work B
 - ¶: Work C
 - §3: Point of Difference
 - ¶: Work A
 - ¶: Work B
 - ¶: Work C

- As you analyze a work of art, keep in mind the following:

- Who is the artist?
- What is the subject of the work?
- Where and when was the work painted?
- What type of painting is it? (religious, historical, allegorical, still life, portrait, landscape)
- Which category dominates?
- What is the actual size?
- What kinds of colors are used?
- Is the composition simple or complex? Symmetrical? Crowded or spacious?
- Are there any images or elements that seem to repeat? What might that pattern mean?
- Is the focus on the center or marginal areas?
- Are colors bright or subdued? Are there dominant colors? Are there contrasts?
- What kind of perspective is used?
- What is the function of the piece?
- If a portrait, is the figure in action? What is the background? What can you tell about the figure?
- What are the proportions of the figure's body parts?
- If a scene, what kind of story is depicted? Are there many figures or few?
- If a landscape, what is the spectator's point of view? How far can the spectator see into the picture?
- What kind of human activity is shown, if any?
- What is the general character of the scene?
- Is the work spontaneous or calculated?
- How do the formal elements convey theme or mood?
- If a sculpture, was it carved, modeled, molded, welded, etc.? What kind of three-dimensional forms are important? How does the sculptor use line, space, color, light?
- If architecture, what is the purpose? What forms were used? What is the shape of its constituent parts? What is the relationship between the exterior and the interior?

- If part of your assignment to think about the culture and context that helped produce the work, consider what the work says about the period or culture in which it was created? How does the work fit into a stylistic category or artistic movement? How does it not fit? How two works with the same type of content look totally different because of the style?

- Titles of artworks should be *italicized*.

- Write your analysis paper in present tense (“The color blue *suggests* that...”), not past tense (“The color blue suggested that...”)

- Art History papers typically use either MLA or Chicago Style formatting. Check with your professor for her or his preferences.

- Use the vocabulary from the discipline. Incorporate the terms that you have learned about in class, and be specific! Don't say “picture” when “painting” is more exact.

- If you are stuck at the start of the writing process, write down everything you notice about an artwork, no matter how minor it may seem. These minor observations could develop into something sophisticated by the end of the writing process.

- If you get stuck in the middle of the writing process, ask why an artist made a specific decision and then try to imagine how it could have been if it had been otherwise. Why is a dress red? How would the image be different if it weren't so? This may help you understand the reason it is red.
- Write your papers in a third-person editorial voice. Do *not* write "I think the artist selected red as the color for the dress because the artist wanted her to symbolize..." Instead, write "The color red in the dress suggests that the woman is intended to symbolize..."
- Keep in mind the audience of your essay. While there is typically no default or specific audience, you should assume you are writing for an educated reader (not *just* your professor) who is willing to hear your interpretation and willing to agree with you. Do not assume your reader is entirely familiar with what you're talking about. Being specific often means putting into writing that seems like something your professor will already know, but the purpose of a paper is to illustrate whether *you* have learned it and a good way to show that is to be as detailed and specific as possible.

A BRIEF GUIDE TO MLA STYLE

The official style of the Modern Language Association requires that all cited material be given a parenthetical in-text citation that identifies author and the information's page number with complete bibliographic information at the end of the essay on a page called "Works Cited."

MLA style papers should be double-spaced. Do not include a cover page unless instructed to do so. In the upper left corner of the first page, place your name, the course name, the professor's name, and the date. Center a title. Place your last name and page numbers in the upper right corner. The paper should have one-inch margins and 12-point Times New Roman font.

Citing in MLA Style

When you cite material, place a parenthetical in-text citation at the end of the sentence. The period for the sentence will go to the *right* of the in-text citation. Do not put a period between the author's name and the page number. If you have used the author's name in the sentence, place only the page number; if you haven't used the author's name, put the author's last name and the page number.

BOOK: IN-TEXT CITATION

(_____) or (_____).
 Author's Last Name Page Number Page Number

According to Kleiner, Africa is "as diverse as the continent is vast" (522).

Africa is "as diverse as the continent is vast" (Kleiner 522).

Place the complete bibliographic information on a page at the end of the essay. Title this page "Works Cited."

BOOK: BIBLIOGRAPHY

_____, _____, _____, _____, _____, _____, _____.
 Author's Last Name Author's First Name Title (italicized). Edition Publication City Publisher Year of Publication. Medium

Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner's Art through the Ages: A Global History, Volume 1*. 14th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2014. Print.

For additional help with MLA Style you may consult W.W. Norton's *The Little Seagull Handbook* (2nd edition) by Richard Bullock, Michal Brody, and Francine Weinberg. You may also consult the Purdue Online Writing Lab at <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>.

A BRIEF GUIDE TO CHICAGO STYLE

Chicago Style provides two methods of documenting your sources. First, whenever you have cited information from a source, include a superscript number and a footnote.¹ Provide a complete note or a brief note (your instructor's preference), then list the source on a bibliography page called "Bibliography."

Chicago Style papers should have double-spaced main text; footnotes and the bibliography should be single-spaced. Include a cover page. Place a centered title about one-third of the way down, capitalized as you would capitalize a book. Place your name, the course information, and the date—all centered—approximately two-thirds of the way down the page. Page numbers should be placed in the upper right corner. The paper should have one-inch margins and 12-point Times New Roman font.

Citing in Chicago Style

When you cite material, place a footnote after the material. Provide a complete note or a brief note.

Example: Africa is "as diverse as the continent is vast," according to Kleiner.¹

BOOK: COMPLETE NOTE

_____, _____ (_____: _____, _____), _____.
 Author's Name Title (italicized) Publication City Publisher Year of Publication Page(s)

1. Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages: A Global History, Volume 1*. 14th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2014), 522.

BOOK: BRIEF NOTE

_____, _____, _____.
 Author's Last Name Shortened Title (italicized) Page(s) cited.

1. Kleiner, *Art through the Ages*, 522.

Place the complete bibliographic information on a page at the end of the essay. Title this page "Bibliography."

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Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner's Art through the Ages: A Global History, Volume 1*. 14th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2014.

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¹ **How to insert a footnote:** If you're using Microsoft Word for Windows, place the cursor where you want the footnote superscript to go; then select *Reference* and then *Insert a Footnote*. If you're using Microsoft Word for Mac, select *Insert* then *Footnote*.