

Writing an Art History Paper

By Maureen Gandy '12

Writing about art is based on the same analytical principles used for literature or history, but it requires a different approach and different observational skills. In an art history paper, we must employ a visual vocabulary and translate our visual impressions into a concrete verbal articulation. While this kind of writing can take many forms, the ultimate goals of any art history paper should be to explain the relationship between the technical form of a work and its impression on the viewer and to articulate how the visual elements work together to convey an overall effect.

There are several basic ways to write about art:

I. Formal Analysis:

A formal analysis is the fundamental form of writing about art and often the first taught in any introductory art history course. In a strict formal analysis, no other information is required besides that which you can see, and while some knowledge of the subject matter helps, your focus should be on the visual elements of a work. A formal analysis focuses on aspects like line, color, composition, and style, and describes the effect of these artistic decisions on the viewer. While any formal analysis must employ a good deal of description, it is important to remember that even a pure formal analysis must always be thesis-driven and each point should tie back to the overall interpretation of the work.

Example of a short formal analysis:

In Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin*, the artist uses one point perspective, balanced composition, and vibrant primary colors to convey a sense of stability and order, thus representing the Christian narrative in the idealized, harmonious aesthetics of the Renaissance. In the foreground, a man and woman stand on either side of a central figure; their adjoining hands creating a focal point which extends back to the doorway in the horizon line. The orthogonal lines created by the tiled pavement move the viewer's eye along the same central path and emphasize the perfect perspective of the scene. The deep tones of yellow and green in the central man's clothing complement the red and blue in the woman's, and form the palette for the rest of the selections; a simple, pure combination of colors that contributes to the sense of order. The almost perfect symmetry of the scene, as well as the relatively empty middle ground, underscores both the spiritual theme and the aesthetic values of the time.



Note how the writer balances description of the work, using a vocabulary based on knowledge of artistic techniques and visual elements, with analysis of their effect on the viewer. The thesis (in bold) provides a framework for the rest of the paragraph and acts as the driving force behind the descriptive observations.

The example above merely demonstrates the type of writing typically employed in a formal analysis and is therefore shorter and less thorough than most visual analyses. Also

Art History Paper Format

Jane E. Aaron



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Abstracts of Papers Delivered in Art History Sessions College Art Association of America. Meeting, 2000 The Routledge Companion to Digital Humanities and Art History Kathryn Brown, 2020-04-15 The Routledge Companion to Digital Humanities and Art History offers a broad survey of cutting edge intersections between digital technologies and the study of art history museum practices and cultural heritage The volume focuses not only on new computational tools that have been developed for the study of artworks and their histories but also debates the disciplinary opportunities and challenges that have emerged in response to the use of digital resources and methodologies Chapters cover a wide range of technical and conceptual themes that define the current state of the field and outline strategies for future development This book offers a timely perspective on trans disciplinary developments that are reshaping art historical research conservation and teaching This book will be of interest to scholars in art history historical theory method and historiography and research methods in education Art History and Anthropology Peter Probst, Joseph Imorde, 2023-12-12 An in depth and nuanced look at the complex relationship between two dynamic fields of study While today we are experiencing a revival of world art and the so called global turn of art history encounters between art historians and anthropologists remain rare Even after a century and a half of interactions between these epistemologies a skeptical distance prevails with respect to the disciplinary other This volume is a timely exploration of the roots of this complex dialogue as it emerged worldwide in the colonial and early postcolonial periods between 1870 and 1970 Exploring case studies from Australia Austria Brazil France Germany and the United States this volume addresses connections and rejections between art historians and anthropologists often in the contested arena of primitive art It examines the roles of a range of figures including the art historian anthropologist Aby Warburg the modernist artist Tarsila do Amaral the curator impresario Leo Frobenius and museum directors such as Alfred Barr and Ren d Harnoncourt Entering the current debates on decolonizing the past this collection of essays prompts reflection on future relations between these two fields

Disaster Response and Planning for Libraries Miriam B. Kahn, 2012-02-21 Provides the tools librarians need to prepare for disasters that can ruin their holdings of books journals audio and videotapes and CDs describing the steps to planning for and implementing a workable disaster response plan

Pedagogical Reckoning: Decolonizing and Degendering the Art Historical Canon in the Classroom and Museum Sooran Choi, Gillian Greenhill Hannum, 2025-09-02 Pedagogical Reckoning Decolonizing and Degendering the Art Historical Canon in the Classroom and Museum brings together leading voices in art history museum studies and pedagogy to confront the Eurocentric and patriarchal foundations of traditional art historical education This timely anthology provides a range of actionable strategies for reshaping curricula exhibitions and research through the lenses of decoloniality gender justice and global inclusion Edited by Sooran Choi and Gillian Greenhill Hannum the volume includes contributions from scholars artists and educators across institutional contexts from large research universities to community colleges and art

schools Its chapters span three key areas inclusive classroom pedagogy critical museum and curatorial practice and decolonial research methodologies Essays explore intersectional frameworks informed by postcolonial theory feminist critique queer studies and ethnic studies while also providing practical tools such as sample assignments case studies and curatorial models Uniquely this anthology integrates scholarly analysis with pedagogical reflection offering readers both conceptual frameworks and concrete applications It builds on recent literature such as *Teaching South and Southeast Asian Art* and *Expanding the Parameters of Feminist Activism* while extending the conversation through its focus on classroom agency community responsive teaching and institutional reckoning Ideal for art history instructors museum professionals and students in anthropology cultural studies and education Pedagogical Reckoning serves as both a critical resource and a methodological guide It is suitable for classroom adoption professional development and curriculum planning and will appeal to anyone committed to transforming the way we teach curate and write about art

The History of Art History Udo Kultermann,1993 *Newsletter, East Asian Art and Archaeology*,1998 *PosterAnnual*,2005 [Resources in Education](#),1987 **Abstracts and Program Statements for Art History Sessions** College Art Association of America.

Meeting,1986 *The Holt Guide to Documentation and Writing in the Disciplines* Laurie G. Kirschner,Stephen R. Mandell,1989 **The Little, Brown Essentials Handbook for Writers** Jane E. Aaron,2003 This handy book answers common questions about the writing process usage grammar and research writing Writers at all levels will appreciate the minimal terminology and clear explanations and examples Writers in all disciplines both in and out of school will appreciate the extensive sections on research document design and source citation The third edition s new features include a checklist for every part of the book an overview of the writing process expanded chapters on research writing especially finding and using online sources emphasis on citing electronic sources in all styles with a new chapter on Columbia style for the humanities and the sciences and Web Sites for Writing and Research dozens of sites that can help with research composition revision and document design

Studies in Insular Art and Archaeology Catherine E. Karkov,Robert T. Farrell,1991 This volume inaugurates a new series of American Early Medieval Studies Amongst the areas covered are the decoration of wooden architecture Picts and Vikings in northern Scotland Irish medieval lake dwellings Irish and Viking age coinage and metalwork

Academic Literacies Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater,1991 This book joins the continuing debate over cultural literacy but offers a new point of view the students

Visual Literacy: Writing about Art Amy Tucker,2002 Publisher Description **The Little, Brown Essential Handbook for Writers** Jane E. Aaron,2003 The Little Brown Essential Handbook Fifth Edition offers the currency and authority of The Little Brown Handbook in a brief spiralbound format This easy to use reference clearly and concisely answers questions about the writing process grammar punctuation research writing documentation and more New in the Fifth Edition Extensive and up to date coverage of MLA APA Chicago and CSE documentation styles New chapter on avoiding plagiarism including discussion of Internet term paper sites and detection

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