

Visual Analysis Essay Assignment

Due: Week 14 (class meeting before spring break)

- late final papers lose one letter grade per day past due (see syllabus for “Late Work” policy).
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Assignment value: 100 total points

Grading Scale for ART 200: A (90-100), B (80-89), C (70-79), D (60-69), and F (0-59)

Explanation of Letter Grades:

A— Excellent. Student displays strong evidence of original thinking; outstanding organization and capacity to analyze and synthesize visual elements and historical information; superior grasp of subject matter with sound critical evaluations; evidence of and ability to apply extensive knowledge base.

B— Good. Student displays grasp of subject matter with some evidence of critical thinking and analytic ability; reasonable understanding of relevant issues, but lacks nuance and depth.

C— Average. Student achieves the basic requirements of the assignment in concept and execution. Student displays a minimum understanding of the project and executes the project adequately.

D— Below Average. Unsuccessful execution of the requirements of the assignment. Student displays confusion or lack of interest on the execution of the project.

F— Failure. Student does not meet minimum requirements of the assignment; insufficient quality for college-level work.

Length and Formatting Requirements:

- at least two full pages of text, no more than three (excluding heading/title)
- double-spaced
- 12-point Times New Roman font
- 1-inch margins
- no extra spaces between paragraphs
- italicize artworks’ titles (EX: Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*)
- On a separate page at the end of the essay, include an image of the artwork with an appropriate caption that identifies, artist, title, date, and location

Objective: A visual analysis is the result of closely looking at the formal elements of an artwork (composition, line, shape, color, space, scale, texture, contrast, etc.) and interpreting their effects to suggest plausible meaning. This essay requires thorough observation and careful word choices to demonstrate *how* intended meanings are communicated through aesthetic objects.

Students will select an artwork of their choice and determine which visual elements are most compelling. They must not only describe what is represented, but also analyze *how* these elements affect the artwork’s meaning. Be sure to use accurate art vocabulary. For this assignment, discussion of historical context is unnecessary.

NOTE 1: Students are not permitted to select an artwork discussed at length in class lectures and/or the text; any overlap will result in an automatic letter grade deduction.

NOTE 2: Search the following museum collection databases to find an artwork not discussed in class and/or the text:

- <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>
 - <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/>
 - <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/>
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Here is a list of questions to help your analysis. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list, and not all of these points will relate to your topic:

A. **Type of object:** Are you looking at a painting, engraving, photograph, textile, sculpture, etc.? If you are considering sculpture, is it low or high relief, a freestanding figure, a group of figures, a combination of these?

B. **Methods and Materials:** How was the work made? Are oil paints or watercolors used; how does the brushwork appear? Was it woven on a loom? Was it carved out of wood or stone (subtractive method)? Is it an object modeled from clay or wax, then cast in bronze (additive methods)? Were a variety of materials used? How does the choice of method and material affect the shape, scale, or design of the work?

C. **Composition:** Is the arrangement of forms symmetrical or asymmetrical? If the object is composed of a number of different figures or forms, how are these arranged in relation to each other? Is the basic form open or closed? That is, does it have a simple, contained silhouette, or do parts thrust out in various directions?

D. **Volume:** What kind of volumetric forms are basic to the work? Geometric, such as cones, cubes, or pyramids, or irregular forms? Are they jagged or smooth? How are they organized?

E. **Space:** How do form and space interact? Is the work a relief that creates the illusion of space? Is the figure meant to be seen in space from a particular view? Is it frontal? Does it turn in space? Can its composition be fully appreciated and understood from one vantage point, or does it require more?

F. **Line:** Is there linear emphasis on the surface of the object? Are the dominant linear elements seen in the forms themselves or are they incised in the surface of the forms? Describe the character of the lines: Primarily horizontal, vertical, diagonal, smooth and flowing? Do lines direct the way in which one “reads” the work?

G. **Light:** How does light affect the work? Are the forms and surfaces arranged so that a particular effect of light and shade will be attained? Does light enhance or play against contour?

H. **Color, Surface, and Texture:** Consider the surface texture. Is it polished or unpolished? How does this affect the play of light and the expressive qualities of the work? Consider the color of the material, if visible. Is color added or is it inherent to the material used?

Basic Essay Elements:

1. **INTRODUCTION** – In your introductory paragraph, provide the artist, title, and date of your artwork. Include a brief overview of the main subject or figures (in other words, what are we looking at?). The last line of your essay's introductory paragraph must be your thesis statement, which answers the following question: what are the most important compositional elements in this artwork and why?

A **THESIS STATEMENT** is an argumentative statement that conveys your essay's main idea. A thesis can be somewhat hypothetical, but is defensible with information other than opinion (i.e., visual evidence). The thesis statement suggests the ultimate interpretation that will be demonstrated in the body paragraphs that follow.

2. **BODY** – Your essay's body paragraphs support your thesis statement. Since the primary focus of this essay is an interpretation of the visual elements, these paragraphs will include a combination of description and analysis.

3. **CONCLUSION** – Revisit your thesis statement (although with different phrasing than when first presented in the introduction). Include a brief summary of the main points you demonstrated in your essay, and end with some final comments about how your insights help us to better understand your artwork.