

When we think critically about art, we're not necessarily finding fault with it or evaluating whether it's "good" or "bad" art. Instead, we're questioning our own response to the work and looking for reasons for that response. In other words, we're looking at cause (the characteristics of the artwork) and effect (the response they elicit in us).

If you are asked to analyze a piece of art—which is sometimes called *formal analysis*—you can start by considering the different components or features of the artwork. You'll need to consider not just the subject matter, but also aspects of the medium being used. You might also be asked to take into account the context in which the art was produced, i.e. how the artwork relates to things outside of itself like individuals, institutions, power structures in society, or distinguishing characteristics of the artist/period/culture.

Below are some questions you can ask yourself when trying to make observations and generate ideas about art.¹

Basic Questions

- What is your initial reaction to the artwork?
- When, where, why, by whom, and for whom was the work made?
- Where would the work have been seen? (e.g. a private home, gallery, or public space)
- What are the physical properties and form of the artwork (e.g. material, texture, size, colour, composition or arrangement of elements), and what are their effects? See the following pages for more questions about particular types of art.
- What meanings and values does this work express?
- What does this work say about its creator and the socio-historical context it was created in?
- Does the title help explain the meaning of the work?

Questions about Drawing and Painting

- What is this subject matter, i.e. who or what is in the picture? What, if anything, is happening?
- If a figure is present, where is his/her gaze directed compared to the viewers (you or other figures in the picture)?
- If two or more figures are present, how are they positioned in relation to each other? Are they looking at each other?
- If it is a portrait of a person,
 - how much of that person is shown, and how much space does he/she fill, and what effect does this have?
 - is the person fully frontal, turned three-quarters, or in profile? what impression does this give?
 - is the face presented realistically? why or why not?
 - are the subject's hands, facial expression, tilt of the head, posture, props, surroundings, clothing, etc. communicating anything about his/her personality or social status?
 - does this individual seem to represent a certain place, time, or society?
 - is the figure allegorical (i.e. does it represent some abstract concept)?
 - if it is a self-portrait, what image does the artist project of him- or herself?

¹ Taken and adapted from Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing about Art* (11th ed), Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2015.

- If it is a still life,
 - what is the point of interest? is it the objects themselves, or the artist's skill in presenting them?
 - is it realistic, or does it hint at allegory?
- If it is a landscape,
 - what is the relationship between human beings or manmade structures and the environment?
 - does the environment reflect emotion?
 - what does it say about nature? Is it wild or orderly?
- If it is non-representational art (i.e. abstract or expressionist art),
 - how do the colours, shapes, lines and textures interact?
 - what effect does the size and shape of the work have?
 - is there evidence of the artist's hand?
 - does the title inform or illuminate your response to the work?
 - what does the artist say about his/her work? does this work support or contradict those statements?
- What are the contour lines (outlines of shapes) like? strong and thick or faint and indistinct? regular or irregular?
- What does the medium add to the roughness or smoothness of the surface?
- If paint is used, is it tempera (flat and dry), oil (where brush strokes can fuse, blend, and be applied thickly), acrylic (which is versatile), or watercolour?
- Are the colours bold and contrast strongly with each other, or do they gradually transition? Are colours realistic, expressive, or symbolic? Use the following terms when referring to colour:

hue = colour (e.g. purple, yellow)

value = light or bright vs dark; more white gives a higher value, whereas more black gives a lower value

saturation = strength or brightness of hue (i.e. vivid versus pale)

- What effect does the light have? Is there a sharp contrast between dark and light, or is the light gently graduated? Is it theatrical/exaggerated, or natural? What is the source of the light?
- How do the objects and figures share the space? What is the focus of the composition or arrangement? What effect does this have? Keep in mind that

diagonal lines = motion, animation

horizontal lines = tranquility

vertical lines = stability, strength

circular lines = motion

- Is there depth or recession in space through overlapping, foreshortening, shading or shadows, the use of perspective, or the use of colour to suggest nearness/vividness and farness/dullness?
- What is the effect of the size and shape of the work?
- What is the effect of the orientation of the work? Is it vertical/portrait or horizontal/landscape?

Questions about Sculpture

- For what purpose was this object made?
- What is expressed through the representation?
- What is the relationship of the sculpture to

idealism – when an idea (usually beauty) dominates, and the work presents a loftier or less realistic image

realism/naturalism – faithfulness to appearances, accurately referring the surfaces and shapes of people, places, and things

abstraction – forms are recognizable but simplified

- If the work is a portrait,
 - does it seem to be representing an individual or a social type, or both?
 - what does the pose and facial expression imply? (e.g. effort, rest, arrested motion, authority?)
 - is the shape geometric (e.g. cubical, spherical) or irregular?
 - is the figure's silhouette or outline open or closed?
 - are any bodily features or forms distorted or exaggerated? If so, why?
 - if it is a bust, how/where does it end?
- If the sculpture is nonobjective or nonrepresentational (i.e. if the artist's aim is to convey feelings, intuition, or the unconscious with little or no representation of external forms), pay attention to
 - the scale: is it massive or smaller than expected?
 - the relationship between the parts of the piece
 - the site, and how it occupies space
 - the title: is the title playful or significant?
 - comments by the sculptor (e.g. in an artist statement)
- What effect does the medium have? What are the associations with the material? Is it a traditional medium (e.g. clay, stone, wood, bronze) or non-traditional/industrial material (e.g. Plexiglass, celluloid, fluorescent lights, cardboard, steel, wire, etc.)?
- What is the effect of the tactile qualities of the sculpture, i.e. those caused by the material or by the tools that worked on the surface?
- Has the sculpture been carved (where material is taken away), modeled (where material has been added), or assembled (where materials are joined)?
- What is the effect of colour? Is it used for realism or symbolism?
- Is the sculpture intended to be seen from multiple views, or is it strongly oriented toward a single viewpoint?
- What is the scale, i.e. the size in relation to the original subject in real life or to the viewer?
- What was the original location or site? Was it on a pedestal or base, a niche, a public square? Is it an “environmental sculpture,” i.e. one that was made to be in a specific location?

Questions about Photography

- Is it a manipulated photograph (one which has been altered by hand or computer)?
- Is it a fabricated photograph (one in which the subject has been constructed or staged)?
- Who took the photograph? Was the print produced by the same person who exposed the negative?
- What is the title of the work? Did the creator give the title, or was it added later by viewers or cataloguers? Does the title include the date or location?
- Is the date that the print was made different from the date the photo was taken?
- What type of photographic process was used to produce the negative or the positive print? Why do you think the photographer chose these particular processes?
- What are the physical properties of the photograph? For instance,
 - What are the dimensions of the print, and what effect does this size have on the viewer?
 - What material is the photo printed on (e.g. paper, metal, silk)? If paper, is it matte, glossy, or somewhere in between?
 - Has it been trimmed or cropped?
 - Is the print damaged and faded, or pristine?
 - How do these physical properties influence the viewer's reaction?
- Is the print coloured or black and white, hand-tinted or retouched? If black and white, where are the darkest and lightest areas, and is there high or low contrast? What effect does this have?
- If the subject of the photo traditional (e.g. landscape, still life, portrait, historical, documentary)? Are the figures or objects arranged or do they appear natural? Are there any props?
- If the photo is two dimensional (i.e. on one flat plane),
 - how is the subject represented?
 - where are the most important forms located on the plane?
 - is the composition balanced or unbalanced?
 - what is left out of the frame, and what exists along the edges of it?
- If the photo is three dimensional
 - where is the main activity taking place: the foreground, midground, or background?
 - is the space shallow or deep, static or dynamic, closed or open?
- What is the photographer's vantage point, i.e. where was the photographer in relation to the subject (near or far)? How does this vantage point contribute to the mood or content of the image?
- What is the angle of vision? Is it similar to normal vision, or is the lens distorted? If so, why?
- Are there areas of sharp focus and soft focus? What parts of the subject are sharp (i.e. within the depth of field)? What meaning does this focus convey?
- Is the image detailed or grainy, and how does this contribute to or detract from the image?
- Was natural or artificial lighting used? Where is the main (and perhaps secondary) light source? Is the lighting harsh, subtle, flat, dramatic, etc.? What effect was the photographer trying to achieve through the use of light?
- How long was the exposure time, i.e. do any blurs or streaks signal movements over time or the passage of time?
- Given the above,
 - what do you think the photographer was trying to say in this image?
 - what aspects of the subject did the photographer want to emphasize?
 - what was the photographer's attitude toward the subject?
 - what does the photograph convey about a place, time, person, event, or culture?

Questions about Video Art

For video art, consider:

- the impact of the visual images (e.g. their subject matter and sequence)
- the use of sound: is there music, dialogue, background noise?
- the context: where is the video being shown? How does this affect your reception of the video?
- political implications (e.g. whether the content or style of the video satirical or critical)
- connections with other art forms: does it seem similar to other film genres (e.g. documentaries), or does it seem aligned with other schools of art (e.g. surrealism)?