

Guide for Art History Writing by Marie Glackin



When writing for an Art History class, you are challenged to put what you see into words. This is what makes writing about art unique—and also a little frustrating. You can't simply include a quote of a painting to illustrate your point; instead, you must try to translate the visual aspects of your chosen piece into words so that your reader can see it in his or her mind.

Papers about art will often include lots of “artsy” vocabulary for this reason. You'll read about the composition, the lighting, more about the colors than you probably ever wanted to know! Most importantly, you'll read about what these different elements add up to *mean*.

- Use **Chicago Manual of Style**. You may use footnotes or endnotes, unless your professor has a preference. This style is often confusing to work with at first, but the Writing Studio has a good book for a resource, and you can find information online, too. Take advantage of technology here—some writing programs will automatically insert footnotes or endnotes for you, so look around the tools available.
- Research. This is obviously essential. **Research early** and make use of Inter-Library Loan to obtain books from other libraries. If you can, go to the University of Iowa art library and check books out from their extensive collection. Utilize online databases. If possible, include primary source material (material that directly talks about what you're researching, which was written during the time period—like a letter from the artist to a friend that references the artwork). As soon as you find out about an upcoming paper, you can start thinking of a topic and start researching.
- In addition to research specifically about the piece of artwork you choose to examine, more **general sources can be helpful**. For example, a paper on a painting from the Renaissance may benefit from research that includes both critical examinations of the painting itself and more general explorations of Renaissance symbolism, religion, politics, gender roles, and so on.

- Come up with a **strong thesis**. Make sure every part of your paper flows from that thesis and strengthens your argument, and refer back to the thesis in your conclusion to remind the reader of your point and leave them thinking about what an awesome case you made for your ideas! **Before you solidify your thesis, look at every part of the artwork and see what you can use in your argument.** You may notice something small that entirely changes your point of view.
- Your paper will probably **include images**. If you only mention a certain work in passing, this may not be necessary, but if, in any way, actually showing the image will strengthen your argument, show it! Explain the painting or sculpture as best as you can, but include an image, or images, to help your reader see your points.
- **Images should be put after the paper, but before the Works Cited.** Put one image per page, centered. Get a good-size, good-quality image, and print it in color. **Label your images.** Your professor's preference on information included in a label may vary, so it's a good idea to check to see what he or she wants specifically. Here's an example of what the label might look like:

Figure 1 (or whatever figure it is)

Artist's name

Title of the Work

Date (most likely a year)

Where it is housed (Museum Such and Such, City, or maybe "Private Collection")

Your label should be centered beneath the image, and each should be consistent.

- **Cite the source of your images in your Works Cited;** in the text, when you want your reader to refer to an image, you should **place the figure number in parentheses after your sentence:** "The girl is also clearly wearing a shirt with a panda on it, illustrating her awesomeness (*Figure 3*)." Do this where it makes sense. Do not go into a long and complicated explanation of an image and then leave your reader without referring them to the actual image.
- **Page numbers** are always a good idea. If there is a title page, do not put a page number on it—begin numbering on the first page of writing with 2. If there is no title page, begin with page number 1 on the first page of writing. Page numbers should continue all through the paper and appear on image pages and on each page of the Works Cited.
- Take the time to fully describe and **explore the piece of artwork**. You needn't be entirely objective. Much of the time, an artist's intention may be to make the viewer *feel* something. Examine how you feel when you see the piece, or how you think the artist wants you to feel.
- **Think about it in context**—it isn't just art writing, it's art history writing, and the history is important. Explore the symbolism. Is there religious meaning? Political meaning? Integrate everything you can about the artwork into your argument. The composition and colors in a painting can mean a lot. Are the colors muted or bright? Are they violent? Romantic? What is the artist trying to say with each of the choices he or she made during the creation of the piece? How can you use their vision and message in your argument?
- In science classes, professors may prefer that you be very concise. That isn't necessarily true in writing for the Humanities, including art history. Don't be afraid to **put in description**. Use some adjectives. If you keep your thesis in mind and **choose important details** to talk about, you will only aid your argument. For example, if you want to talk about a painting of a queen and explain how it shows her as a powerful political figure, you could explain how her posture is regal and portrays strength, or how the presence of armor in the background suggests she has waged successful military campaigns. At the same time, avoid unnecessary details. Remember that everything should stem from and lead back to your thesis argument.

A sample thesis follows:

“Titian and Artemisia both painted a common theme for artists of their time period: the famous pagan heroine, Lucretia, just before her suicide; yet their representations of Lucretia differ greatly, for the artists show in their finished work the influences of their dissimilar lives.”

Here is an example paragraph from the same paper, which received an A grade from Dr. Christina Penn-Goetsch. The whole paper compares two depictions of the legendary Roman matron Lucretia, one by Artemisia Gentileschi and the other by Titian.

“The *Death of Lucretia* painted by Titian (*Figure 2*) was done around 1525 and was modeled on the *Aphrodite of Cyrene*, a statue of antiquity which lends the Lucretia her stance and her shape. This choice of reference has interesting connotations in and of itself, for Lucretia was held as a model of chastity and virtue for Renaissance women and Aphrodite, conversely, is antiquity's goddess of love and sexuality. Goffen argues that it is no accident and that, in modeling her after an Aphrodite, Titian desired to eroticize his Lucretia.¹⁵ Certainly, then, it is no mistake that she appears here without a stitch of clothing to cover her nakedness, in marked contrast to Artemisia's depiction of a disheveled, yet clothed, woman. Titian's Lucretia stands in the center of the image, her curves emphasized in glowing shades of pink and gold, her body on view. Even if Titian did not wish to turn Lucretia into a titillating figure, the beauty of her classically-inspired form is clearly emphasized.”

Note that this description of the painting includes information about the pose, composition, and colors, yet refers the reader to an actual image of the painting so that he or she can see these details. The rest of the paper considers the two paintings in historical context and explores how the artists, who differed greatly, might have wished to express different ideas even though they painted the same subject. Other relevant information is included, too—Titian chose to model his Lucretia on a statue of Aphrodite, probably for a good reason.

It can be frustrating to write a paper over a piece of artwork, especially if you aren't used to writing in a Humanities discipline. **The most important element of your paper** (other than your thesis, which should be your focus all through the writing process) **is the research you do**, so always keep that mind. Think of your sources as building blocks for your argument. You want the strongest ones that you can find. You can use them as a good foundation upon which to build your own interpretation of an artwork.

If you' ever have any questions, remember that you can always ask your professor. He or she will most likely be more than happy to give you advice, and your question might be something every person in your class is wondering and is too shy to ask. Greg Cotton, our resource librarian for the Visual Arts, is also an excellent person to whom you may refer for assistance. He has put up great general information on Art History writing on his webpage, accessible from <http://cornellcollege.edu/library/research/visual-arts> and he is there to help you with your research if you get stuck!