

# Guide for Writing in Art History

## About Writing in Art History

Art history courses cultivate the skills you will need to critically analyze images, objects, and architectural spaces as well as academic discourse, scholarship, and historical sources. Art history is a humanistic discipline that brings together research to explore historical contexts while engaging in ways of looking at, describing, and understanding works of art. In this discipline, developing your own voice as a writer and creative thinker is just as important to your success as developing the analytical scope of a research project.

As with academic writing in other disciplines, writing in art history should both **inform** and **persuade** your reader. According to Sylvan Barnet, author of *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, successful papers about art do at least one of the following:

- Introduce authors, artists, or works to a reader.
- Convince readers that they have undervalued an author, artist, or a work because they have not read or looked at them carefully enough.
- Show a relationship between different works that was previously unknown or unobserved.
- Give an analysis of a work in order to increase common understanding of it.
- Throw light upon a process of artistic invention.
- Illuminate the relationship of art to life, science, economics, ethics, religion, etc.

By Dr. Patrick Hajovsky

## About this guide

This guide contains the following sections:

- About Writing in Art History
- Types of Writing in Art History
- Evidence in Art History
- Conventions of Writing in Art History
- Citations & Formatting
- A Few Other Tips

*The Disciplinary Writing Guides are designed to provide an introduction to the conventions, or rules, of writing in different subjects. These guides have been designed by Southwestern professors to help you understand what will be expected of you in your classes.*

## Types of Writing in Art History

In most art history classes at SU, students develop one or more short visual analyses that build toward an independent research project, culminating in a full-length research paper. Full-length research assignments ask you to analyze the context of an artwork by critically engaging with scholarly texts and comparing relevant ideas and images

across them. Assignments usually begin by asking you to select a particular artwork from a historical context covered by the class and to spend time observing and noting its formal composition. You then develop and organize those observations into an interpretive thesis and argument that explains a culturally relevant historical context.

Classroom experiences allow you to practice visual analysis, to apply particular vocabulary, and to understand the important issues related to art historical contexts in a variety of geographic areas, cultures, and time periods. It is necessary to become familiar with the issues and debates of your particular course as you develop your research agenda. You should engage with the topics and questions that are read and discussed in class and critically challenge them by providing your own interpretation within the academic discussion.

Independent research projects allow you to focus on the context of one or more works using particular kinds of evidence, from primary sources to more recent scholarship. Research papers can examine the history of

particular artwork(s) at any point from their original context(s) to their subsequent location(s). They can also explore different theories and methods used in understanding the artworks, from their production to their reception. As you interpret one or more particular artworks based on an informed thesis, you are often encouraged to develop an interpretation based on your own disciplinary interests. There are many ways that you might apply your interests to art history.

- A history student might compare a biographical figure as found between texts and images.
- A biology student might explore particular ways that animals are represented.
- A political science major might research ways in which images of rulers articulate structures of power.
- A business major might investigate the economic factors that contribute to the success of an artist.
- A philosophy student might compare aesthetic ideas across cultures.

Here is an example of an art history thesis that could support either a visual analysis or a research paper:

**“Michelangelo’s *David* is a monument dedicated to overcoming adversity.”**

The visual analysis could describe *David*’s gesture and scale, its comparison to Classical models, its realism versus idealism, and so on. A more informed analysis and research paper could investigate where the statue was originally displayed and why.

Professors have different methods for guiding you through research projects, and it is always a good idea to consult with them in an office visit as you develop and write. Remember that you are asked to write papers not just to please your professor, but also to engage with an audience who is knowledgeable but perhaps not as informed about your subject. Professors know that writing is a **discovery process** that involves positing ideas, testing them as you gain knowledge, and revising as you narrow upon your topic. It is therefore necessary to be sure that your final essay makes a clear argument and excludes extraneous information. It is also imperative that you begin early and work regularly rather than wait until the last minute.

# Evidence in Art History

Art history assignments usually ask you to analyze one or more artworks as you formulate and explore an interpretive thesis. To support your thesis, you can draw from various kinds of evidence:

**Visual analysis (sometimes called formal analysis) is an organized verbalization of the visual aspects of an artwork.**

Visual analysis usually begins by describing the formal elements that compose an image (such as line, shape, color, and texture), noting how the parts relate to one another and to the image as a whole. Visual analysis goes beyond mere description by organizing the relevant visual elements around a main idea or interpretation.

Visual analyses can include research on **technique** (how the visual elements were created), **style** (how they appear within a certain tradition), and **iconography** (what they mean culturally and historically).

The best way to conduct a visual analysis is to look at and study an artwork *before* researching, write

down your observations, and then compose a description organized by your interpretive angle that employs the specific artistic vocabulary you have learned in your course and/or through research. You can then compare your analysis with others when available and adjust your interpretation based on the knowledge you have gained and your responses to that knowledge.

**Secondary sources include scholarly perspectives about the artwork and its historical context.**

It is important to find relevant and current knowledge in recently published, peer-reviewed sources and to never reproduce a source without critically analyzing it.

Avoid relying on encyclopedias or broad survey books for information; instead identify what

kinds of arguments scholars are making and engage your interpretation within this conversation. The library has many peer-reviewed books and articles in print and online. The Art History Infoguides on the library website contain additional scholarly resources. Other website sources are only occasionally useful and should be verified by your professor.

**Primary sources include the artwork itself and information from its historical context, such as archival documents, historical publications, and artists' statements.**

Primary sources are often encountered within secondary sources, but whenever possible you should go back to the original sources and find out more about them, especially how knowledge about an artwork is constructed from them.

# Conventions of Writing in Art History

- Introduce authors by using **their full name in the first instance** in the text, and by **last name only in subsequent references**. Artist names follow regional conventions (like authors in Western art, and always in full in Chinese art). If an artist's name is unknown, it can be cited as "Anonymous" or by an established attribution such as "Master of the Aachen Altarpiece" or "Cuzco School of Painting."
- **Regional and period styles are capitalized**, such as "Italian Renaissance," "Abstract Expressionism," and "Han Dynasty."
- **Titles of artworks and exhibitions, like titles of books and journals, are capitalized and in italics**. If an artwork does not have an official or common title then a short descriptive title will suffice.
- Especially for full-length compositions, **your paper should include a title** that announces the theme of the study and the way it will be analyzed; these two elements are usually separated by a colon. A good example of this type of thesis is: "The Tlaloc Statue of Cuauhtinchan: Summoning Rain through Classical Imagery."
- **Descriptions and analyses of artworks are put in the present tense**; past tense is used when describing historical contexts.
- **In general, it is okay to use the first person "I"** to express one's intended argument or perspective, as long as it expresses an informed opinion backed by evidence.
- **Use your own words and paraphrase** rather than cite directly from sources. It is acceptable to quote directly from sources, but **only if that quotation is under discussion and analysis**.

# Citation and Formatting in Art History

- Because art history is sometimes interdisciplinary, style guidelines may vary. **Art historical texts usually follow the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS or Turabian), and sometimes the Modern Language Association (MLA)**. Author-date citations can be given in parentheses in the text, or as footnotes or endnotes, depending upon the conventions used in the sub-discipline. You can find more information on MLA, CMS, and Turabian styles in the "[Student Resources](#)" section of the Debby Ellis Writing Center Website. **A good way to determine the correction usage is to identify the citation style of texts from your course readings. If in doubt, consult with your professor** for the best style to follow.
- **Be sure to accurately cite your sources**. Even "common knowledge" arguments and data can be strengthened by citing authors who have more evidence for those claims than we do. Sometimes it is difficult to determine when to cite, especially if the information is based on direct observation of an artwork. Your sources may show you how to look at an artwork, and you should also observe how they apply general observations to a particular idea or image. Though you may apply information and knowledge from an in-class lecture or discussion, you should find where that information is published rather than cite from your notes. When in doubt, ask your professor.
- **Page length assignments for papers do not include notes, illustrations, or bibliography**. Endnotes, illustrations, and bibliography go in that order on separate pages at the end after the text. Do not insert illustrations into your text. Instead, assign numbers to the illustrations and insert references to them in parenthesis at the end of the sentences or clause where they appear, like this (Figure 1).

# A Few Last Tips for Writing in Art History

- **Choose appropriately sized topics** that are informed by class themes and reading assignments. The “Student Resources” section of the Debby Ellis Writing Center website has [“Tips for a Strong Thesis Statement”](#) and [“Tips for Beginning Research”](#) that may be of use to you as you begin your paper.
- **Avoid tentative words or phrases.** The point of academic writing is to make clear, strong assertions and to back them with evidence. Words or phrases like “seems to be,” or “almost” often undermine your assertions and make your reader less confident in your scholarship.
- **Choose your words carefully.** The nonspecific phrase “there is/there are” does little to guide your reader into your thoughts about your topic. The verbs “illustrates,” “shows,” and “details,” and their synonyms do not accomplish much in visual analysis. Your description should avoid these words and instead clearly explain what is happening in the artwork(s).
- **Choose descriptive adjectives and adverbs.** Words like “very,” “extremely,” and “so” rarely enhance an argument.
- In all analysis, **show your work!** Show your reader how images and concepts relate to one another, and elaborate and detail your thought process as you describe and define your interpretation of the artwork. Your goal is to help your reader form a mental image of an artwork and a complete understanding about it. Don’t assume your readers (even your professor) can fill in the details.