A GUIDE TO VISUAL ANALYSIS

The following list of formal artistic attributes describes how formal qualities coalesce to create meaning in works of art. The consideration of each of the multifaceted implications of these formal elements can help a writer articulate his or her description of the object under investigation, and aid in a writer’s understanding of the artist’s creative methods. Analyzing these formal qualities helps a writer describe the meaning of the object and explore how the various formal qualities of an artwork combine to impart a distinctive, generally agreed-upon meaning to viewers.

In a visual analysis essay, a series of unconnected analyses of an object’s isolated aspects will not properly engage a reader, nor will it accomplish a writer’s ultimate objective. The most important aspect of the writer’s thesis considers how these separate factors function in tandem toward a common goal, such as the communication of an idea, style, narrative, or the expression of particular emotions.

When a writer begins a visual analysis paper, he or she should look carefully at the object with fresh eyes from afar, and then look closely and observe as many details as possible upon close inspection. Then a writer may step back and look at it as a whole once again. The viewer’s consistent movement back and forth—towards the object, observing it closely, and from a distance (also observing it “in the round,” or from all angles, if the artwork is a sculpture), and observing the artwork within its surroundings as it is installed in a museum or gallery setting—are crucial techniques for achieving an accurate evocation of the artwork through written description. The ideal visual analysis essay should evoke for the reader an impression of the object that is as vivid and unified as what the artist created.

When considering the formal elements listed below, a writer must take copious notes on each and every element; the way these elements function together; how the implied meanings and visual suggestions of the elements intertwine; and the writer’s close observations of details. Details are easy to forget if a writer does not record his or her thoughts in the moment of observation. Visual recollection of an object often changes in a writer’s memory, and it is thus important to take accurate notes, and to obtain a high-quality image for later consultation. When drafting a “museum paper,” it is crucial to bring your (typically) handwritten notes to class. When working with a writing tutor, a tutor will ask to see these notes in order to discern if any difficulties the writer experiences are based on observations that have not been thoroughly recorded, or if the writer has not spent enough time dedicated to intent looking at the object.
PAINTING
(Many of these elements are also applicable to two-dimensional artworks in other media.)

• LINE

How do lines—the delineation of form, or the linear quality of representations—relate to one another? How do they define, order, arrange, or relate to the composition as a whole?

Consider silhouettes, internal lines, linear perspective, horizon, and architectural lines. Consider painted lines, such as those that represent folds or wrinkles in fabric; strands of hair; the flow of water, waves, or ripples; structural or architectural markings; or any other linear aspect. Is the representation of these images solely linear in quality, or is it conversely loose and “painterly” in execution? The wrinkles and folds of fabric; a person’s hair; water (the ocean, streams, rivers, or more stagnant pools or ponds), can all be created through either exclusively linear representation or through a combination of linearity and painterly execution.

How do lines function within an artwork to direct the movement of a viewer’s eye? Do these lines direct the viewer’s eyes purposefully, contributing to the understanding of a narrative? Or do they obfuscate a narrative and confuse the direction in which a viewer’s eyes might travel to “read” the image?

• COMPOSITION

How are forms, elements, and any human figures in the object’s compositional design arranged, and to what end? What visual effect is achieved through this composition? Does the artist achieve symmetry or asymmetry? Does the artist achieve balance, harmony, or rhythm among his or her various forms? What are these forms? How does light and shadow function to create compositional unity or fragmentation? How and where does the composition direct the viewer’s eyes? Does the artist use repousoir or other compositional devices to guide the viewer’s eyes? Does the artist employ any type of perspective (atmospheric or linear), and where in the composition do these various forms seem to operate, or to convey the most meaning? Reading an image’s composition involves reading the “operation” of these forms as a whole and as a unified combination of seemingly disparate elements.

• SPACE

How, if at all, is the illusion of space created? Are linear or atmospheric perspectives employed or rejected? Is the space deep or shallow, continuing or stunted? What other visual techniques has the artist employed to create a sense of space? What effect does darkness create in the viewer’s mind? What effect does light create? Was the artist’s ability to create depth or a sense of space hampered or augmented by the time period during which the image was produced? For example, a religious icon from the medieval period may suggest that artists, in general, had not reached technical mastery over the expression of deep space, when compared to a religious painting from the late Renaissance. Conversely, a later modern painting may express virtually no depth in comparison to the painting from the high Renaissance. What does an artist’s expression of space—depth or flatness—suggest about the meaning of an artwork?
• COLOR

Describe the particular colors the artist(s) used, and the distribution of color. Is color bright, dull, naturalistic, or seemingly unnatural? Does the artist employ “local color,” primary colors, secondary colors, tertiary colors, or complimentary colors? Is the juxtaposition of certain colors jarring and discordant, or harmonic? Does the artist use specific colors to focus the viewer’s attention on a particular part of the painting? What are they? Is some color meant to recede, while others are used to give a sense of projection? How and why does this work? Is the artist’s use of color representational (naturalistic), or expressive (heightened or changed to achieve a particular effect)? Is color symbolic of any particular concept? If so, what is that concept, and how does color communicate this?

For example, if red and orange naturalistically render both a fiery sunset and blood in J.M.W. Turner’s The Slave Ship (below), how do these colors equally express the intangible concepts of rage, fear, and/or cruelty? Why? Is this because these emotions, too, can be considered “fiery” and combustible; bloody or violent? Is this because of our literal association of these colors with fire and blood?

![Image of The Slave Ship by J.M.W. Turner](image)

• LIGHT

Is the image flooded with light, or does light illuminate only particular areas of the composition? What and where is the main source of light? Are there multiple sources, or is light diffuse throughout the image? Are these sources naturalistic, or are they conversely theatrical and purposefully constructed? How intense is the light? Look closely to determine what actual colors
are used to create a sense of light and dark. What effect does light and shadow or darkness achieve? What mood does light or darkness create in this image? How is shading and shadow handled, and does the artist employ methods of *chiaroscuro* or *sfumato*?

**BRUSHWORK/HANDLING OF PAINT**

What type of paint did the artist use? What type of support did the artist use? How does the type of paint the artist used (oil, tempera, different mixtures for fresco, or acrylic paint) change the ways in which the artist handled the paint? How did the artist handle his/her paint? Is this visible in the texture of the painted surface? Are individual strokes visible? Is the surface smooth, with layered glazes of paint, or is it built up with thick strokes, creating a rougher surface on the support (impasto). Is the artist’s handling of paint loose and dynamic? Did the artist apply the paint heavily or lightly? If lightly, does the support show through to the surface? How do variations in different brushwork evoke texture, light, color, and mood or emotional expression? Do figures blend with the background, or did the artist use certain types of brushwork to delineated form against the background?

**FIGURES**

Analyze the figures, if there are any. Discuss the depiction of their proportions, positions, stances, and actions. Are they lifelike? Are they rendered realistically, idealistically, naturalistically, or abstractly? Are they detailed, or barely visible? What sense does the viewer gain of figures’ actual characters, emotions, or personalities, if any? Are figures central to the artwork’s meaning, or are they secondary? How do these figures interact with one another formally? Do their limbs or bodies intersect with one another? Are they given their own space? Are they divided compositionally into groups? Do their gazes or gestures allow the figures to “speak” or relate with one another in a type of conversation? Does the arrangement of these figures, and their interaction with one another (or lack thereof), communicate something to the viewer about the mood and tone of the artwork?

**TEXTURE**

Does the painting’s surface include multiple textures? If one were to reach out and run one’s hand across the surface of the painting, what textures and sensations would one feel? (Do not physically touch the painting, but try to sense this with your eyes.) Is the application of paint thin, exposing the weave and texture of the canvas or support? If so, is the canvas gessoed, or is it raw? Is it covered with a different type of primer? Consider whether the paint is applied to canvas or to another type of support, such as cardboard, wood, or metal. How does a specific type of support affect the ways in which the artist achieved the texture of the painting? Is the artist’s application of paint smooth? Does this smoothness translate to our understanding of the image as a hyper-realistic representation? Does it create a mirror-like surface? Does it add a sense of preciousness to the subject or to the object itself, or is smoothness secondary to the painting’s meaning? Is the texture of the paint rough? Are there thick patches of paint that create varied textures across the painting’s surface? If so, would one describe this as “impasto?” How did the artist achieve this, and with what type of paint? Does the type of paint affect the degree of
impasto achieved by the artist? How does a rough and variegated surface texture contribute to the meaning of the painting?

• **NARRATIVE**

Is there a narrative at play in this artwork? If so, what story does the artist tell? What in the observable, formal qualities communicates this narrative? How is action, and thus the evolution of narrative, achieved through formal composition and the culmination of all formal elements combined? Remember, analyzing narrative does not mean describing what is happening, per se: it requires that you describe how the artist employs formal elements to communicate a narrative. Thus, all of your observations about the above elements should convey substantial clues as to how the artist expressed a narrative, if at all.

**LINE IN DRAWINGS, PRINTS, AND ILLUSTRATIONS**

In certain prints, drawings, and illustrations, consider the ways lines have been created. An understanding and explanation of what techniques artists used to create prints is crucial to this consideration. Did the artist create the print through an etching or a drypoint etching, an engraving, a wood cut, a lithograph, or a silkscreen? Did the artist use a different technique? How does manual labor affect represented lines? For example, lines are more physically difficult to achieve in an engraving than in an etching. Lines are more difficult to achieve in an engraving and an etching than in a drawing or a sketch. Identify which technique the artist used to create lines. Did the artist do this, or did an engraver actually do this, following an artist’s direction?

How do lines and ink function in place of paint? As opposed to utilizing a broad range of pigments, etchers and engravers must utilize a variety of tonalities that derive from varying applications of ink: the depths of carved lines; the number of “impressions” (the number of times a plate is used and how worn it becomes), and the “state” of the plate (whether an artist/engraver has refreshed the plate by re-engraving or re-etching to re-use a plate that has already created many impressions). How do the gradations of tonality and the application of ink affect a print’s linearity? This important question includes a consideration of “crosshatching;” contrast in light and dark; the techniques the artist used to create tonal variations; the impression; and how the number of the print (if applicable) affects the representation of lines. For example, are the lines faint because the printing plate has been used many times for many impressions already, or are they bold because the print under investigation seems to have been one of the first the artist produced using this particular plate?
SCULPTURE

• TYPE

What type of sculpture are you analyzing? Is it low relief, high relief, a free-standing figure, a group of figures, or a combination of these? How does the type of three-dimensional artwork affect the artist’s creative technique? For example, what restrictions did this type of sculpture present in the actual creation of it? How does the type of sculpture change viewer perception? Is the viewer meant to engage with the artwork by walking around it? Is it life-sized, or greater than life-sized? Is it meant to overpower the viewer? Is it meant to be seen from above or below? Is it a small-scale object meant for another kind of viewer interaction? What kind of interaction is that? Remember that viewer interaction with sculpture is different than viewer engagement with two-dimensional art objects. Describe this unique interaction, and how the specificities of the sculpture under examination determine how the viewer engages with his or her space and the space of the object.

• TECHNICAL MEANS/MEDIUM

How did the artist handle carving or assemblage, and in what medium? If carved, did the artist carve the sculpture out of wood or stone? What type of stone, if any? Does the type of material make a difference in the artist’s physical act of carving, and thus enhance or change the meaning that is evoked by the sculpture? For example, did a harder type of stone make deep carving less possible? Did softer stone allow for deep or detailed carving, but then reflect its weakness in cracks or breaks that may have been repaired through restorations? Alternately, did the artist create the sculpture from metal? What type and how? Did he or she create it through casting? Describe this process, if applicable. For example, did the artist first model his or her sculpture in clay or wax and then cast it in bronze? Explain the process of creating this sculpture, inasmuch as this process is evident and can be deduced from the visual and physical qualities of the artwork. If it is a modern assemblage, or a combination of a variety of media, explain how this approach contributes to meaning and to viewer perception of the artwork. In this case, explain why we might consider an assemblage, such as Robert Rauschenberg’s “combines,” for example, to be “sculptures.”

• RELATION OF TECHNIQUE AND MATERIAL TO FORM

Are some forms in this sculpture or assemblage inherent to the processes of carving or modeling? Are these forms the unavoidable result of the process through which the artist created the artwork, or did the artist seem to purposefully exploit technique and/or material to achieve particular forms? What are these features, if any? For example, if it seems that an artist had to work around a particularly stubborn area of stone, and he or she thus created a rocky base from the stone’s difficult area (let us say, upon which figures might stand), how did the stone’s inherent attributes dictate the actual composition and appearance of the sculpture?
• COLOR

Did the artist add color to this three-dimensional artwork? If so, how, and with what? What type of paint was used to add color, and to what types of surfaces? Is the artist’s use of paint descriptive or expressive? How are these considerations important to understanding the artist’s intent and the object’s meaning? If the artist did not utilize additive color, is the color of the material important? What is this color? If the material is bronze, does the bronze have a patina? What colors does the bronze reveal? If the sculpture is stone, identify the inherent variations in the color(s) of the stone? Does the use of different types of stones produce varying colors, known as “polychromy?” Did the artist employ varying materials of disparate colors—polychromy—purposefully, as in Charles Cordier’s sculpture *Negro from the Sudan* (below left)? If the artist did this purposefully, to what end, and how does this contribute to viewer understanding of the sculpture? Or, as in Rauschenberg’s “combine,” *Monogram* (below right), did the artist use color to a different end, and what was that goal? In other sculptures, how and why did an artist use a certain stone to purposefully utilize that stone’s color, grain, or natural variations?

![Image of sculptures](image.jpg)

• TEXTURE

In keeping with considerations of medium in sculpture, visually analyze the sculpture’s texture. One should not touch the artwork, but rather discern the effect that the artist’s technical means and purposeful use of texture has on viewer perception, and how this evokes meaning, feeling, and/or emotion in the artwork. Does the surface appear jagged or smooth? Does it shine, or have a patina? Is it dull? How do these factors create an emotional impact and communicate meaning? Did the artist produce something purposefully rough-hewn to evoke feelings of rusticity; to abstract form; or to accentuate certain emotions and to emphasize psychology over naturalistic representation? Did the artist go to great lengths to create a sculpture of substantial smoothness? Do smooth surfaces shine or reflect light? How does this smoothness affect meaning and communicate messages to the viewer? Are there combinations of textures, and did the artist utilize these combinations for naturalistic representational purposes? For example, in service of
naturalism, an artist may employ a variety of textures: he or she may have left a patch of supposed grass (on which figures stand) roughly carved, to emphasize an earthy quality at the base, while carefully polishing what we comprehend as the skin of figures to a smooth, soft, even texture. By contrast, did the artist utilize the purposeful juxtaposition of varying tactile qualities to meet other agendas? If so, what are they?

• **VOLUME**

In relation to texture, what forms are present in the object that produce a sense of volume? Does the sculpture have an open or a closed silhouette? Does it utilize both, and if so, where? Does it occupy only its own space, or does it seem to encompass a greater space than its own physical mass? Is it small and intimate, or is it monumental? How does its size provide the viewer with an understanding of the artist’s intent and the intended effect of the sculpture? Where are there protrusions, and where are there areas of negative space? Are shadows important to viewer understanding of volume, and thus to viewer experience of the artwork as a whole? How so?

• **LIGHT**

Did the artist arrange forms in a particular way to achieve certain effects of light and shadow? Where and how is light and shadow produced in/on this three-dimensional object? How would light have played upon the sculpture in its originally-intended location, if known? Has the placement of the object within a museum setting changed, enhanced, or conformed to the originally-intended play of light and shadow on the three-dimensional form? How does the effect of light and shadow enhance or contribute to the meaning of the object for the viewer?

**OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

(not all will be applicable)

You may wish to consider the following other components of your analysis, depending on the limitations of your ability to discern these factors through visual analysis:

• The artistic school and/or movement: Consider predominant themes and concerns in artwork of this time period and movement, and how the particular artwork under examination exemplifies or debunks these concepts.

• Consider the socio-political and historical background of the region in which the artwork was produced at the time of its creation, only inasmuch as it is pertinent to the work of art’s meaning or to your understanding of the artwork through visual analysis.

• What is/was the original purpose or function of the artwork? Many artworks were commissioned to fulfill a particular function or purpose. How and to what extent does this purpose, and/or the specificities of the original commission, determine the artwork’s meaning and the artist’s intentions?

• Relatedly, what was the originally intended location (if known/applicable)? How does the
artwork’s originally-intended location affect our understanding of why the artist created the artwork as he or she did? The originally-intended location often directly determines the artwork’s medium, size, and overall appearance (including most aspects of visual analysis). This is an important consideration in understanding the change of meaning that occurs when collectors and museum curators remove an artwork from its originally-intended location—regardless of intention—and how the artwork and its meaning are thus decontextualized or recontextualized in new spaces. What is the effect and change in meaning or viewer perception of this new space? What meaning does the artwork’s place in its new location provide for contemporary viewers? Consider change in time period, institutional setting (i.e. museum versus church), nation, and culture.

For example, Niclaus of Haguenau and Matthias Grünewald created the Isenheim Altarpiece (below, open) specifically for the Monastery of Saint Anthony, and much of the panels’ content relates specifically to the function of providing sympathetic imagery for patients with the disease Saint Anthony’s Fire, who stayed at the monastery’s hospital. If this altarpiece was moved into a museum setting, how would its new location change its context and function, and how would viewer relationship to the altarpiece change?