# Art & Art History: Formal Analysis & Comparative Analysis

Although a work of art can be analyzed on multiple levels and in multiple contexts, several key details are almost always addressed in formal analyses and comparative analyses. This handout provides helpful questions to ask about a piece of art in order to direct attention to the most salient details in the often-overwhelming amount of information any one work possesses. These questions should be considered, but only addressed in the final analysis if they are relevant details to the overall meaning and impact of the work.

## Formal Analysis:

A formal analysis is quite simply an analysis of the forms utilized in the work of art. It is a close inspection of the artist’s use of aspects such as color, shape, line, mass, and space. The purpose of the paper is to analyze the formal elements of an artwork; it is not meant to be an interpretation. The primary concern of this assignment is to attempt and explain how an artist utilizes and arranges elements of design. While this may seem redundant, translating a piece from visual to textual language is often quite difficult, and is crucial to the field of art history.

*Formal Qualities of a Work*

Before beginning the writing process, it may be beneficial to spend a few minutes identifying the visual elements of the work. How has the artist organized the piece? Is it symmetrical? How does the eye move across the work? Is there focal point? Here are a few other elements to consider in your analysis--however, don’t feel pressured to include all of them, as they may not be relevant to every analysis.

* Line (horizontal, vertical, diagonal, curved)
* Composition (symmetry, negative space)
* Texture (medium, etching, cross-hatching)
* Depth (two-dimensional, three-dimensional, picture plane)
* Color (hue, value, saturation, primary/secondary, complementary, warm/cool)
* Shape and Form (organic, geometric)
* Line (contour lines, width of lines, lines of direction or movement)
* Light and Shadow (contrast, shading, cross-hatching)
* Figures (is the figure a person? what is their demeanor?)
* Abstraction vs. Representational

If the piece is a sculpture, you may want to also consider scale, volume, and whether the sculpture is in-the-round or relief, in addition to the elements listed above. Also, don’t feel restricted to these elements; everything that is visible to the eye is worth mentioning if you feel that it is relevant.

### Include a brief but thorough description of the work in the Introduction

Make sure to include some basic information about the work so that the reader is able to find the piece outside of your formal analysis.

* What is the title?
* Who is the artist?
* What year was it created?
* What is the medium?
* Where is it located now? Where was it made?

*The Analysis*

While formal description is a major component of this assignment, you may also include how the artist manipulates elements to pull a certain reaction from the viewer. You can include your own emotional response to the piece, however, be sure to back it up with evidence and cite the formal qualities that caused the reaction.

*Contextualizing the Artwork*

In some cases, you may reference historical information to further contextualize the piece, however it is always good to check with your professor to see if that is something they allow. Some questions to consider when including historical context include:

* What country or region was it made in? What is its provenance (place of origin and record of ownership of the object)?
* Does it belong to a particular movement, age, or school of thought?
* Does it have an influential patron?
* Is this work typical or atypical of its period, style, or artist? What artistic influences can be seen in the artist’s work?

## Comparative Analysis:

The comparative analysis starts with a formal analysis of two or more individual pieces, and then adds another level of discussion that evaluates relevant similarities and differences between the pieces. This added level is useful in revealing details about trends within historical periods, regional similarities, or growth of an individual artist over time.

* In describing the individual pieces, keep to the same conventions used when doing an individual formal analysis.
* Remember, differences between artworks are often just as important as similarities in a comparative analysis.
* Depending on the length and complexity of comparison, one of the two following basic structures will be more appropriate:
* “Lumping” involves discussing all details of one work, and then all details of the second work. This method is preferred in lengthy or broad comparisons to avoid zipping back and forth between the works too quickly. Remember to compare the two works by referring back to the first work when discussing the second. This will ensure that you don’t simply write two descriptions.
* “Splitting” involves discussing a particular point in both works before moving on to another point. This method is preferred in comparisons dealing with fine details instead of a broader look at each work as a whole. Remember to discuss each point evenly to maintain a clear, parallel structure.

Works Referenced:

Barnet, Sylvan. *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*. 8th ed.. Pearson, 2008.

Zucker, Hannah. *Writing a Formal Analysis in Art History*. The Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center, 2012.