

Applied Humanities

What Is Art?

Defining the Humanities

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Objective: Recognize what we study when we study the humanities.

For the past four weeks we've practiced doing the work of the humanities, but we haven't yet paused to ask what the humanities actually *are*. As a category, the humanities not only groups similar disciplines like art, literature, and music, but also distinguishes them from other disciplines, such as those in the sciences.

Comparing Science and the Humanities

The scientific disciplines excel at measuring, making objective claims, and developing technology—that is, at focusing on the “how-to.” We use scientific methods to identify types of things (rocks, organisms, stars), describe functional mechanisms (serotonin uptake), and measure how the world works (the boiling point of any substance).

Fundamentally, science is the study of nature (including the chemical and biological functions of the human body), whereas disciplines in the humanities focus on universal human experiences like love, humor, and the search for meaning. Put another way, we can use physics to calculate the flight path of a person shot from a cannon, but we use the humanities to explore *why* someone would be shot from a cannon, or why thousands of people would gather to see such a spectacle.

Disciplines in the sciences use equations and formulas to explain natural phenomena, but these are far less useful in the humanities. For example, if we're discussing what makes the TV show *The Walking Dead* so compelling, we can't simply say “The force of a story is equal to the narrative constant multiplied by how different it is from our lives and divided by how well we can identify with it.” Explaining a compelling story in scientific terms makes no more sense than explaining gravity by saying objects fall because they want to return to Mother Earth. Objects don't have free will, self-awareness, longing, or any of the thousands of other uniquely human experiences that the humanities are meant to explore.

Short-Answer Question

Write a question that is grounded firmly in the sciences. That is, write a question that can be best addressed using the methods of scientific inquiry.

No response saved yet.

Short-Answer Question

Now write a question that is grounded firmly in the humanities. That is, write a question that can be best addressed using the methods of inquiry most often used in the humanities.

No response saved yet.

Just as exploring science can teach us the methods of biological investigation, how to calculate measurements, and the mechanics of operating a microscope, exploring the humanities can teach us to closely examine art or writing, interpret clues, generate and evaluate potential explanations, and consider alternative points of view.

Writing to Learn

You can look at a work of art for one second and probably have something to say about it. But if you look longer and have the internal dialogue with yourself that we call “thinking,” you’ll have more to say about it. And if you seek to communicate that thinking to a friend, you’ll learn even more about what you think as you hear what you’re saying.

Writing takes your learning one step further still. This is why writing is so common in college, especially in humanities courses. Writing lets your instructor see what you’re understanding, but it also lets *you* see what you’ve learned. As you revise your written drafts, you’ll probably develop questions and seek answers to build on your knowledge. Reading your own writing critically will help you see where gaps in your knowledge exist and empower you to fill them.

Considering art without thinking, reading, speaking, and writing is a bit like a scientist mentally cataloging types of ants but never gathering specimens, taking measurements, or making notes: in both cases, there is very little solid knowledge, only wisps of memory. By considering and discussing creative works, you’re expanding your understanding of yourself and others, learning how other people express themselves, and exploring our similarities and differences.

Writing holds us to a higher standard than thinking does, requiring our arguments to be better structured and to hold up over a longer chain of claims. To see something and say

to a friend “Oh yes, I wrote a lengthy paper about that last year” is really to say “I’ve done a lot of reading and thinking about that and have come to understand my perspective on it.” This contrasts sharply with saying “Well, off the top of my head I think...,” which indicates that you’ve given something very little thought.

(By the way, this phenomenon of “writing to learn” holds true in science classes as well. You’re human, after all, and “knowing” and “writing” are grounded firmly in the humanities. So even if what you’re studying is a mechanical system or a computer language, seeing your own description of it will help you assess and deepen your understanding.)

Short-Answer Question

In your own words, what does it mean to “write to learn”?

No response saved yet.

- **Response Board**

Choose one work of art and explain what it means in terms of being both a product of its specific context and also an expression of the universal human experience.

No response saved yet.

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