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Anne D'Alleva

LOOK!

The Fundamentals of Art History

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rigorous, flexible, and creative thinker through your engagement with these established methods.

In art history, we're not looking for a result as specific as 2.5 ml of blue liquid. Your professor is generally not looking for just one interpretation, but for a careful process of interpretation. Yet even as there's typically no one right answer, some interpretations will be more convincing than others, because they take into account more of the available information about a particular subject.

I sometimes use the analogy of being a lawyer to explain this process of building interpretations rather than opinions. In a courtroom, you and the opposing lawyer have the same set of information, but you interpret it in different ways—you argue for two different stories from this same set of information. Moreover, the story you create has to be presented in a certain way, according to the court's standards for the kind of evidence and presentation of evidence that are permissible in a trial. In the end, your story has to convince the jury and the judge by accounting for all the evidence available. If you contend, in a murder case, that your client is innocent, but you can't satisfactorily explain why his fingerprints were all over the gun used in the crime, then your interpretation is not going to convince anyone.

Formal-analysis papers

Formal-analysis papers help you develop the ability to examine works in a sustained and analytical way. As the last two chapters emphasized, you have to be able to do formal analysis well in order to be able to do contextual analysis well and, ultimately, to work in a more precise and sophisticated way with various theoretical perspectives. Keep in mind that formal analysis does not mean producing a long, minute description of the artwork. Instead, you're trying to see how far you can interpret the image without consulting outside sources beyond the basic facts of identification.

Taking notes

Your formal analysis needs to be based on a process of sustained looking. This can be a challenge. Our education and

culture don't train us to do this, so it helps to have a systematic procedure. When you're standing in front of a work it's easy to think that you'll remember all the details of it when you get back to your desk. Unfortunately, that too rarely proves to be true, so you need to incorporate a thorough note-taking practice into the process of looking. I'm assuming here that you've been asked to write a formal analysis of a work that you can see in person.

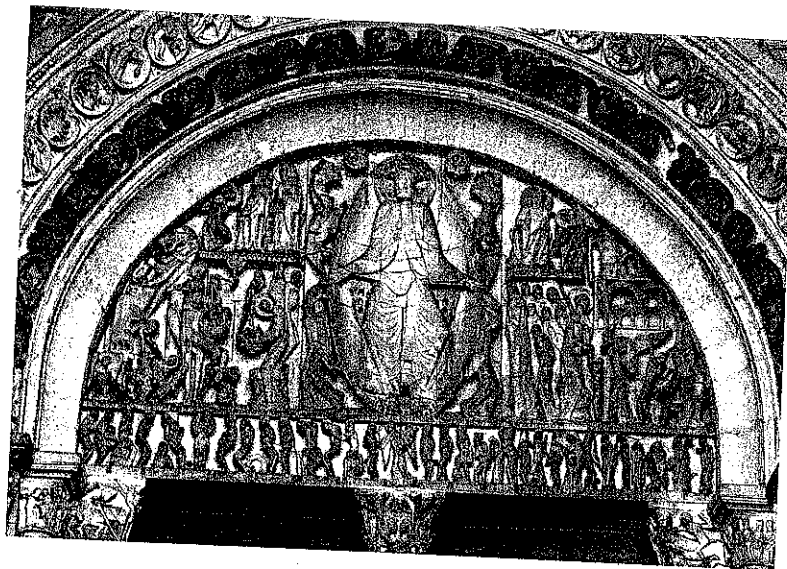
I'll share my own working method here, but remember that you'll have to adapt it so that it works for you. The first thing I do is sit down in front of the piece and spend some time just looking at it, absorbing the different aspects of it without writing anything down. I try to pay attention to visual aspects of the piece that jump out at me immediately, as well as those that take time to engage my attention. If you're working with sculpture or an installation, move around it and look at it from different angles.

After you've looked for a while (at least 15 minutes), start taking notes about the piece. Write a detailed, systematic description of the work, noting its really striking features. When you've written down as much as you possibly can—this will easily take half an hour—go off and do something else. Get something to drink, look at some other works of art, browse the bookstore or another gallery if you're in a museum. Then go back to the work and look at it again, another 15 minutes or so, without writing anything down. Be aware of features that emerge that you didn't see before. Then take a whole new set of notes. At this point, a set of issues or themes, or a perspective should be taking shape. Go back over both sets of notes and see if you can clarify these ideas into a thesis statement, then be sure to have all the visual evidence you need to support that thesis.

Finally, draw the work. Even if you've found a postcard of the work in the museum gift store or a reproduction in a book, still draw it because it's a very effective way to engage your eye in careful looking. I do this when I'm researching: even if I take a dozen photographs of a piece I'm studying and write pages of formal analysis, I will draw it because that process enables me to see things I won't notice any other way. Don't get hung up on whether your drawing is "good" or not or

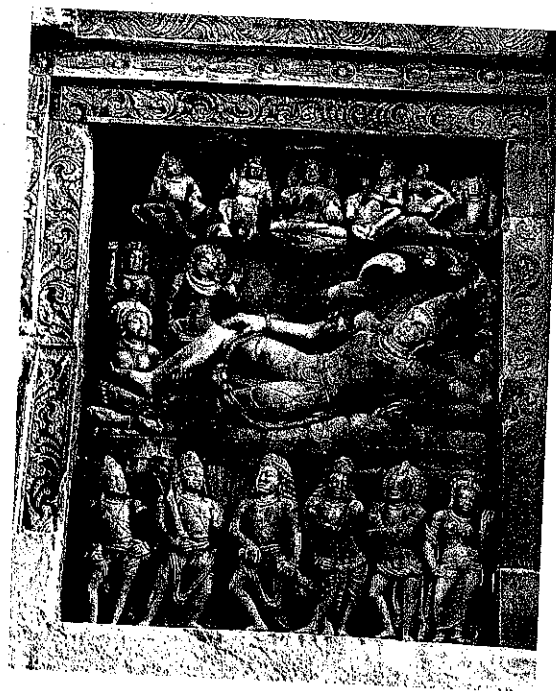
whether you have any talent—this drawing is a working tool. The process may prompt other insights into the work, so be sure to write these down as well.

It's often helpful to go back on another day and repeat the looking process—especially with a rough draft of your paper in hand. If reality intervenes and you just don't have time, then it's even more important to make sure that you take detailed notes and visually engage with the work in a serious way the first time you see it.



4.2 Gislebertus, tympanum depicting the Last Judgement, c. 1130. Autun Cathedral, France.

In this scene, angels escort the saved to Paradise, while demons torture the damned and carry them off to Hell.



4.3 Vishnu Narayana on the Cosmic Waters, c. 530. Stone relief panel. Vishnu Temple, Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh, India.

The writer then organized the body of the paper around each of the issues stated in this opening paragraph. Don't organize a formal-analysis paper "geographically," as if moving inch by inch over the surface of the image—this may lead to a descriptive rather than interpretive approach.

The comparison paper

Formal-analysis assignments often ask students to write a paper comparing and contrasting two works of art. In such papers, you'll discuss the similarities and differences between the works, and use those similarities and differences to deepen your understanding of what's going on in each. The best way to write a comparative formal-analysis paper is not to write first all about one work and then all about the other, but to discuss them together. This means that your introductory paragraph presents a thesis about what the juxtaposition of the two works means; then each paragraph of the body takes up a different issue in turn.

Let's work with an example, the Last Judgement by the French sculptor Gislebertus (active first half of the twelfth century) from the Cathedral of Autun, France, and Vishnu Narayana on the Cosmic Waters from the Vishnu Temple at Deogarh, India (Figures 4.2, 4.3). Since both of these architectural sculptures still form part of the buildings for which they were carved, they can only be directly compared in photographs (unless you're lucky enough to visit these buildings, you'll have to imagine their actual scale and setting). There are some basic similarities between the two images: both are relief sculptures that ornament sacred architecture and both depict deities. There's also a fundamental difference between them, namely the religious contexts in which they were made, Christian and Hindu respectively. Use these basic characteristics as a springboard to start comparing and contrasting the images. You've seen the easy similarities and differences, so look for the ones that aren't so obvious. These should help you to come up with the issues you want to discuss in your paper. Here's a good introduction to this essay:

Portraying the gods is an enduring concern in the visual arts associated with many religions. Images incite devotion, prayer,

respect for religion, and perhaps even good behavior. Two relief panels, one depicting Christ at the Last Judgement and another depicting Vishnu on the Cosmic Waters, show both similarities and differences in how they depict divine beings. Both strive to create an image of the divine body that shows the deity as different from ordinary mortals and awe-inspiring. Both choose big, cosmic moments, the destruction of the universe in the Christian image and the creation of the universe in the Hindu image. And, finally, the architectural setting is key to understanding these images. Both come from sacred buildings and use clearly organized compositions to convey their messages to worshipers in this public setting.

Each one of the three main issues identified here is then discussed in the body of the essay—this introduction serves almost as an outline for the essay. The writer goes on to organize the paper around the three main issues—the divine body, the “big moment,” and the architectural setting—rather than discussing first one work then the other. With the latter form of organization, you risk an essay that’s overly descriptive, rather than interpretive, and one that fails to compare and contrast the two images fully. This doesn’t necessarily mean that you have to deal with each issue for both images in one paragraph—you’ll probably have far too much to say about each to squeeze all that commentary into one paragraph. As an example, here’s how the issue of the divine body is handled by this writer:

Both images use relative scale to represent divinity visually. Christ and Vishnu appear larger than all the other figures in these images. The figure of Christ is a vertical axis at the center of the relief. His arms gesture expansively outward, dividing the souls of the saved and the damned, so that he takes up a maximum amount of space. He is exactly twice as large as the angels who help him in this work, and he is four times as large as the humans. Similarly, Vishnu is a horizontal axis, dividing the composition in half as he dreams the universe into being. He is so large that if he stretched out fully he would break through the frame. No other figure in the scene, even though they are all gods or spirits or demons, is even half as large as he is.

Both of these artists also use anatomy, clothing, and jewelry to emphasize the figures’ divinity. Vishnu has many arms, and wears an elaborately detailed crown and necklace to denote his special nature. Vishnu wears transparent clothing to show off the smooth perfection of his rounded limbs. Unlike four-armed Vishnu, Christ’s body is a human body and he wears a simple, graceful robe. He is shown clothed and his anatomy is de-emphasized because for Christianity the emphasis is on the other-worldly aspects of the body. Only the damned, susceptible to the sins of the flesh, are depicted unclothed in this scene. However, Christ has a halo around his head and another kind of halo, a mandorla, around his body to show his divinity.

Notice that the writer here is using detailed observation, but including the telling details only. There’s no point in describing each feature of the image minutely—and, in fact, a lot of your notes and descriptions from your initial study of the works may not make it into the final paper. Also note that the writer does use some basic contextual information to shape this visual analysis. She identifies the figures as Christ and Vishnu, the religions as Christianity and Hinduism, and the scenes as the Last Judgement and Vishnu dreaming the world into being. But she focuses on what the image can tell us about Christ and Vishnu in formal terms, not what outside sources might reveal. For example, the writer does not turn to the biblical account of the Last Judgement to compare the visual depiction of this event with its textual inspiration.

ple, and don't know much about Zen Buddhism. Your paper should be specific enough in its arguments, so the kind of material presented in a general encyclopedia isn't something that you would need to quote.

Critical moments in art-history writing

I'll address here some of the specific challenges you'll face in writing art-history papers. Remember to consult one of the standard writing guides listed in the Bibliography to get help with more general issues in writing.

Developing a thesis

Your thesis is the overall argument that you present—the main idea that you want to put forward after weighing up all your research. Having said that, I'll admit that it's not always easy to write a simple, clear thesis, or even to work out what your thesis is! When I was starting my PhD dissertation, I found myself going on and on whenever anyone asked me about my topic. A student from another university told me that her advisor recommended first writing a page-long statement of what the dissertation was about, then a paragraph statement, then a three-sentence statement, then a one-sentence statement. In this way she distilled the basic issue she was exploring in her research. This is the way the development of ideas goes. We have this notion of the lightbulb going on in our heads, coming to a sudden brilliant insight that we go out and prove. Actually, I think the process of coming up with an idea is often more like panning for gold. We have to sift through a lot of stuff before we come up with the valuable nugget we want. It is a process of constantly refining our thoughts so that the good, original ideas emerge.

When you're writing a substantial paper, there are actually several stages to developing a thesis, as the sample research on Artemisia Gentileschi above showed. The first is to develop working hypotheses to guide your research. You may want to write down a list of these initial questions. Once you've accumulated a substantial body of research, read through your notes to help crystallize themes or issues that you want to address in the paper. One of the original questions that

prompted your research will probably emerge as the basis of your thesis. During the editing process, when you're working with the first rough draft of the paper, make sure that you're stating the thesis clearly at the beginning of the paper in the introductory paragraphs. Even though, as an undergraduate, you're probably working mostly with secondary sources, your thesis should be original—this is your idea, not just a rehash or summary of someone else's ideas on the subject.

Here are two examples of introductory paragraphs from student essays on African art. Both were produced for an assignment asking students to write about a work of African art on display at a museum. Neither student is a particularly strong writer; both choose the same strategy to open the essay, by providing some general background information about the culture. Despite these similarities, only one provides a clear thesis. The first essay begins:

The Cameroon grasslands consist of many kingdoms, chiefdoms, and villages, which are independent. These villages are mainly self-governing. The Cameroon grasslands consist of important kingdoms. The important kingdoms of the east include Bamum, in the south the Bamileke, and in the northwestern highlands, the Kom, Bali, N'so, Oku, Aghen, Bafut, Mankon, and Babanki-Tungo. There are stories from migration history that imply that the groups arrived in what are now Cameroon grasslands from the region of Tikar to the east. This is believed to have happened from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. There were many trade routes that crossed the paths of other trade routes, carrying people, artwork, and ideas. The arts of the Cameroon can be characterized by traditions of gift giving.

The second introductory paragraph reads as follows:

The Yoruba culture in Nigeria exhibits many traditional elements that stress the relationships between the different realms of existence: spiritual, human, and natural. Through the Egungun traditions, which include Gelede, the Yoruba people emphasize their relationship with the dead who, in return, offer the living a "good" life, which ensures stability, prosperity, and happiness. Indeed a cyclical process of fertility, birth, prosperity, and death is performed through the acts of ancestor worship. In Yoruba culture, there is a male society, known as

Gelede, that emphasizes female reproductive powers through annual performances during the pre-harvest season (March to May). The rituals are practiced through a number of performance rituals, such as singing, dancing, drumming, and costume. Usually performed in the afternoon, Gelede rituals are accompanied by wonderful masquerades, which characterize Gelede tradition. Carved wooden masks, such as the nineteenth-century mask at the William Benton Museum of Art, were worn at ritual performances to represent social, spiritual, satirical, and commemorative values of Yoruba culture.

The second writer succeeds in bringing the general discussion of Yoruba culture around to the artwork she's writing about, and then presents a clear perspective on that piece in her thesis. The first writer doesn't mention the artwork she's dealing with at all in this introduction, and, in fact, struggles later in the body of the paper to deal directly with the work. If she had focused on writing a clear thesis statement about that object, it would have helped her anchor the rest of the paper. In the editing process, then, she could constantly go back and check her work against that thesis statement, to make sure that she was dealing with the object and developing her argument in effective ways.

Writing an introductory paragraph

It's no wonder that students often struggle with introductory paragraphs. There's a lot riding on the introduction: you have to get the reader's attention, explain your subject, and set up your argument so that you can develop it effectively in the body of the paper.

I often recommend that students save the writing of the introductory paragraph for the end of the first draft. You should have a strong thesis and an outline to guide you in writing the body of the paper, so there's no reason for you to start with the first paragraph of the paper. If you want, draft out a very rough version of the introductory paragraph, but don't spend a lot of time on it. Once the rough draft of the body of the paper is written, then go back and write the introduction. Having written the body, you'll know more accurately what the paper is about; even with the best of outlines, your paper will change as you write, because writing itself is a process of thinking

and exploration. Also, your having already produced pages of writing in the body of the paper will remove some of the anxiety that comes with the writing process. With the end in sight, that important first paragraph will be easier to produce.

There are many different ways to handle the introduction to a paper. A direct and effective way is simply to introduce the artworks or issues you are studying and then state your thesis, your point of view on them. Such introductions often work from some general observations to the specific thesis, as in this example:

Masks and costumes have long played a role within cultures all over the world. In many past and present cultures of Africa, masks take on a very important position in both social and cultural contexts. The Kuba people (also referred to as Bushoong), located east of the Kongo heartland in the Democratic Republic of Congo, behold masks not only as objects of beauty, but also as integral components of social life. Most often worn by dancers in public ceremonies, initiation celebrations, or rituals concerning the sacred king, the masks invoke myths of creation and history. The Mask of the Babembe Society is just one of over twenty different mask types considered in Kuba culture as embodiments of spirits (Hahner-Herzog 1998, 82). This mask expresses important spiritual and cultural beliefs of the Kuba in both its form and function. Through its physical makeup and performances in initiation and royal ceremonies, the mask addresses the importance of the institution of kingship and dynastic influences on origin and myth, spiritual government, and aesthetic enrichment among the Kuba.

Sometimes students choose to write more creative introductions, reflecting on a quote or dictionary definition or an excerpt from a poem or favorite novel. They may use the first paragraph to recount their personal experience in pursuing the topic. I've noticed especially in formal-analysis essays that students often recount their experience of the museum visit to provide a context for the formal analysis that then takes up the body of the paper. I tend to regard this as a valid option, although some instructors consider this kind of introduction to be extraneous. If you want to use this kind of opening, it's

probably best to check with your instructor, and remember that you must still make the transition to the body of your paper by introducing your research topic and stating your thesis.

Here's one example of this kind of opening to a paper that discusses a work in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It's long, but I want to quote it here because it's ambitious—the writer is taking a self-conscious literary perspective on his experience, so it will give you a sense of how this kind of introduction can work. The introductory personal narrative actually starts out by playing off a quote from a popular travel book about Italy:

As the sun brightens, the land spreads out a soft spectrum: the green of a dollar bill gone through the wash, old cream, blue sky like a blind person's eye. The Renaissance painters had it just right. I never thought of Perugino, Giotto, Signorelli, et al., as realists, but their background views are still here, as most tourists discover, with dark cypress trees brushed in to emphasize each composition the eye falls on. Now I see why the red boot on a gold and blonde angel in the Cortona museum has such a glow, why the Madonna's cobalt dress looks intense and deep. Against this landscape and light, everything takes on a primary outline. Even a red towel drying on a line below becomes totally saturated with its own redness.

Frances Mayes, *Under the Tuscan Sun*

Although the sky may not have been "saturated with its own cobalt" and the fiery orange leaves did not take a "primary outline"—an effect one would most certainly experience in Italy—the bright fall sun, the leaves, watercolor hues of red, orange, and yellow, and the crisp clean air, however, did form the ambience of a Walt Whitmanesque brilliant New England fall day when my roommate, Chris and [I] began our journey to the beautiful city of Boston, Massachusetts and the Museum of Fine Arts.

To our good fortune, our drive was rather uneventful. However, intermingled between shout choruses of our favorite John Cougar Mellencamp tunes and my pep talks reassuring Chris that, although he is a journalist, he would enjoy the museums,

The conclusion

Conclusions can be hard to write. By the time the paper is ready for a conclusion, you're exhausted, you've had enough, and the temptation is to just stop and leave the thing alone. As understandable as these feelings are, you would be short-changing your work by not bringing it to a proper end. There are different ways to handle conclusions. Summarizing key points of the argument can be simple and effective. You may also use the conclusion to extend your argument by pointing to other issues or ideas that don't belong in this paper, but that you might deal with in another paper or at another time. A third option is to do something creative that expands your work in a new way.

As an example, here's a conclusion to a student paper about the Roman emperor Constantine (reigned 306–37) as patron of Christian churches:

Perhaps it is fitting then that in his death Constantine was treated as a great Roman emperor. It is true that on his deathbed he finally officially converted to Christianity, but his funerary services followed the Roman tradition. Upon his death in 337, the people of Rome "raised him among the gods," pagan gods, by honoring him in a painting that shows him "above the vault of Heaven resting in his celestial abode" (Krautheimer, *Capitals* 39). Thus even in his death Constantine continued to walk the line between paganism and Christianity, and practiced a little of both. Conservatism and adherence to tradition made Constantine a successful emperor, and though he was the first Roman emperor to become Christian his actions prove that he would not hesitate to above all identify himself as a Roman.

The writer effectively uses Constantine's death to close the paper and summarize the key point—that Constantine can be thought of as both pagan and Christian, despite his extensive patronage of Christian churches. Notice that the writer summarizes her interpretation and then extends it to consider the treatment of Constantine's death. She does not unnecessarily summarize all the supporting points or the formal and contextual analysis that developed the argument in the body of the paper.