

How Artwork Communicates: Formal Analysis

“A formal analysis... focuses not only on *what* is seen, but also on *why* it is there and *how* it is presented.” (Hudson and Noonan 45)

Length: 2 – 3 pages, approx. 550 – 800 words

Goals:

- To look closely at a work of art
- To identify formal elements and design principles in this work
- To develop an informed opinion based upon these (observable facts)
- To apply specific, accurate and varied vocabulary
- To write in a way that is clear, insightful, and concise

Process: Here are step-by-step suggestions:

1. Read The Art of Writing About Art, pp. 5 – 15, 44 – 51.
2. Select **1 artist** from the Artist List.
3. Select **1 work of art** by this artist.
4. Look closely, make a sketch, take notes, free-write.
5. Identify 3 of the most important formal elements and principles of design.
6. Form an opinion (thesis) about the work. For example, does the work convey a sense of calm? of mystery? Is the artist successful in conveying a specific idea?
7. Explain **how** the artist employs the elements and principles in a way that supports your opinion.

For example:



main point (inference, thesis): Jim Nutt creates an uncomfortable tension in *Hold Still!! (Please)*.

supporting points (formal elements/design principles):

1. The color choices (mostly warm-hot color palette)
2. The depiction of space (shallow, crowded, constricted)
3. The shapes and line work (angular, awkward)

8. Outline/organize your essay. It doesn't need to be rigid, but it should guide the reader. For example:

Introduction

- introduces the artwork, artist, relevant details
- states the thesis (main point)
- may briefly mention supporting points

Body paragraphs

- formal element or design principle 1
(supports, explains, expands upon the thesis)
- formal element or design principle 2
(supports, explains, expands upon the thesis)
- formal element or design principle 3
(supports, explains, expands upon the thesis)

Conclusion

9. Double-check the goals listed at the top of the assignment. Have you met them?
10. Proofread. Consider reading aloud to yourself. Revise as needed.
11. Give the paper a title. And you're all set!

Tips:

- Please be sure to include the artist's full name, title of the work, medium, dimensions, and date (*if* this information is available).
- For this assignment, you do not have to do research or demonstrate art historical knowledge. Depending upon the artwork, however, some background info may be helpful.

Works Cited:

Hudson, Suzanne and Nancy Noonan. *The Art of Writing About Art*. 2nd ed. Cengage Learning, 2015.