

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Select two artworks from the list of venues for the outside assignment and write a paper that compares and contrasts the two works. The most important aspect of this project is that you choose two artworks between which you can establish a relationship. For example, maybe one work is a realistic painting and the other is a non-representational sculpture, yet you discover that what they share in common is that they both explore the violence and destruction of war.

Format of the paper is to be typed, double-spaced, twelve point standard typeface, and at least 1500 words in length (six pages). Do not include a folder or binding, instead staple in upper left corner.

To accomplish this project, use the four steps of art criticism: description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment.

Step 1: Description (What do I see?)

For description, you must be *objective* and carefully make a list of all the things you see in the work. At this point, do not try to guess why things are there or what they mean.

- What is the name of the artist who created the artwork?
- What kind of an artwork is it? What are its dimensions?
- What is the name of the artwork?
- When was this artwork created?
- What are the dimensions of the artwork?
- List any literal objects in the artwork that you can see (trees, people, animals, mountains, rivers, etc.).
- Consider the significant **art elements** that are present in this artwork and describe them. How is the artist using each of the following:

Line	Shape
Scale	Texture
Direction	Color
Form	Value
Space	Pattern

Step 2: Analysis (How is it organized?)

During this step, you are still collecting facts about the elements and principles of art. In analysis, you discover how the main principles of art are used to organize the art elements of line, color, shape, form, space, and texture. You may not find every principle of art used in a single artwork.

- In this step consider the most significant **art principles** that were used in the artwork.
- Explain how the artist uses these art principles to organize the elements of art that you have already described. Describe how the artist is using:

Balance	Contrast	Emphasis
Harmony	Variety	Unity
Gradation	Movement	Proportion
Repetition	Rhythm	Composition

Step 3: Interpretation (What is the artist saying?)

An interpretation seeks to explain the meaning of the work based on what you have learned so far about the artwork.

- What kind of statement do you think the artist is trying to make?
- Why did the artist create this artwork?
- What do you think it means? What does it mean to you?
- How does this artwork relate to you and to your life?
- What feelings do you have when looking at this artwork?
- Why do you think that the artist chose to work in this manner and made these kinds of artistic decisions?
- Do you think there are things in the artwork that represent other things (symbols)?

Step 4: Judgment (Is this a successful work of art?)

After careful observation, analysis, and interpretation of an artwork, you are ready to make your own judgment. This is your personal evaluation based on the understandings of the work(s). Here are questions you might consider:

- Why do you think that this work has intrinsic value or worth? What is the value that you find in the work(s)? (For example, it is a beautiful work of art, conveys an important social message, affects the way that I see the world, makes insightful connections, reaffirms a religious belief, etc.)
- Do you think that the work(s) has a benefit for others? Do you find that the work communicates an idea, feeling or principle that would have value for others?
- What kind of an effect do you think the work could have for others?
- Does the work lack value or worth? Why do you think this is so? Could the reason you find the work lacking come from a poor use of the elements of art? Could the subject matter be unappealing, unimaginative, or repulsive?
- Rather than seeing the work as being very effective or without total value, does the work fall somewhere in-between? Do you think that the work is just o.k.? What do you base this opinion on? The use of elements of art? Lack of personal expression? The work lacks a major focus? Explore your criticism of the work (s) as much as you would any positive perceptions. Realize that your own tastes and prejudices may enter into your criticism. Give your positive and negative perceptions.

Related topics to consider:

- What information can you find to help you begin to develop your own interpretation of the artwork? Are there sources of information other than just the artwork(s)?
- Does the work of art have an obvious or not-so-obvious function?
- Does it use symbols to reinforce a message? (List)
- Do other artworks by the same artist (if available) give you a better sense of the meaning of the artwork?
- What viewer(s) do you think the artist intended the artwork for? What evidence within the work (or outside) supports that idea?
- Do you think contemporary viewers seeing the artwork understand it in the same way as did the viewers for whom the artwork was originally made? Why or why not?
- What can you find out to help you assess the effectiveness of the artist's choice of medium?
- What tools, materials, and processes did the artist use?
- Why do you think the artist chose this particular medium? (Imagine how it might look if executed in another medium). How might the meaning change with the use of a different medium?
- Where was this artwork intended to be viewed? Does the meaning of the artwork change depending on where it is located?

Requirements for writing a good paper

- The two works that you select must be from exhibitions that you view in person from the list of venues in the outside assignment. They can't be just the venues themselves. For instance, you can't write a paper about the Rothko Chapel and the Museum of Fine Arts. You can write a paper about the paintings by Rothko inside the Rothko Chapel and the installation created by James Turrell in the tunnel beneath the Museum of Fine Arts.
- IMPORTANT: you must find some kind of a relationship between the two works of art. For example, do the two works address a common theme (birth, death, technology, relationships, nature, etc) in dissimilar styles or media? Are they two works that take opposite views of a topic (one is anti-war and the other glorifies war)? Are they from two different time periods and address common themes in different ways--reflecting the era in which they were created? If you are unable to establish some relationship between the two works, see me for advice. It may be necessary for you to change one or both of your selections.
- You must have a good opening paragraph. In it you should mention both artists, the two works, how they are related, and lay out your plan for discussing them. The opening paragraph provides a clue to the structure of your paper that follows.
- You must have a concluding paragraph. The closing should summarize what you have done and provide closure to your paper.
- The structure of your paper can take one of two forms:
 1. You can describe, analyze, interpret, and judge one work and then do the same for the other work.
 2. Or, you can describe both works, analyze both works, interpret both works, and judge both works.
- Sometimes it is more desirable to write the opening and closing paragraphs after you have written the body of the paper.

Justify your conclusions.

Explain why you feel the way you do about this artwork based on what you have observed and learned about it.

Mistakes to avoid

A mistake that students often make is to write a paper that is based almost entirely on observation and description. In this type of paper there is very little analysis, interpretation, or critical thinking. While everything that is written may be accurate, it is not a critical analysis.

A second kind of error is to write a paper that emphasizes emotional responses to the work. In this type of paper there is emphasis on "feelings" at the expense of critical thinking. The weakness in this type of paper is that interpretations and judgments are not supported with analysis, but instead are justified because they are simply the opinions of the writer. While everything that is written may be heartfelt and honest, it is not a critical analysis.

Remember: Analyze, don't summarize!