

The “Art” of Writing

This idea comes from a creative writing teachers course held at the Metropolitan Museum of New York in spring 1990. It is an effective way for students to increase their powers of observation through close examination of works of art and to encourage greater specificity and detail in their writing.

I start with a collection of color reproductions of paintings and ask each student to select a painting. They are to spend a few moments examining the painting and considering its effect on them. Then students are to prepare a brief written answer in response to the following questions:

Image: Does the painting remind you of anything? an object? a person? a place?

Mood: Is the image somber? angry? a feeling of gaiety?

Motion: Is the painting active or static? Are you aware of brush strokes, gestures?

Sound: Does the image give off a sound? Is it noisy? quiet?

Color: Does one color predominate? Is it a varied palette?

After students have responded to their painting, they exchange paintings and respond to subsequent paintings. When everyone has commented on all the paintings, students make use of their initial responses as they complete one of the following writing assignments:

1. Write several lines of dialogue that might occur between people in the painting. Or write an interior monologue for a single person.
2. Write a passage describing the scene in the painting.
3. Use the five senses as a theme. What are the people in the painting hearing, smelling, touching, seeing, tasting?
4. Imagine that you are the artist who painted this picture. Write a letter to your brother or sister in which you describe the painting and how it came to be painted.
5. Choose one painting that has affected you more than the others and write about it. Use the words you previously recorded about that particular painting.

One student wrote the following description of Van Gogh's "Undergrowth with Two Figures." The underlined words are from his initial response sheet

The dark and dreary mood contrasts with the colorful flowers. The people look like dead statue-like ghosts just standing there, while the flowers blow briskly in the wind. The flowers look as if they are in a hollow tube, and there is movement of flowers hitting one another.

The dark and gloomy still colors of the forest contrast with the bright, fragrant, and constantly moving flowers. This scene reminds me of my cross-country trips to national parks and looking at deer standing motionless, looking back at you with no other distractions or noise.

Describing a Work of Art

Just as a poet captures feelings and sensory images in words, an artist captures feelings and sensory images through visual impressions created by such mediums as paint, pencil, stone, and wood. To describe a work of art, follow these steps.

- Observe the piece of art closely. Note your personal reaction—your first emotional and visual response to it.
- Note as many striking details as you can—colors, textures, shapes, hints of motions or feelings.
- Note other types of sensory images the piece of art triggers for you, such as sounds and smells.
- Note the mood and the style of the piece of art. For example, does it seem bright and happy or dark and gloomy? Is it realistic, almost like a photograph? Or has the artist “altered” objective reality, and why do you think he or she did this?
- Decide what the main focus of the piece of art is. If it is a painting, what feature seems to stand out? Why, in your opinion, did the artist choose to emphasize this feature?

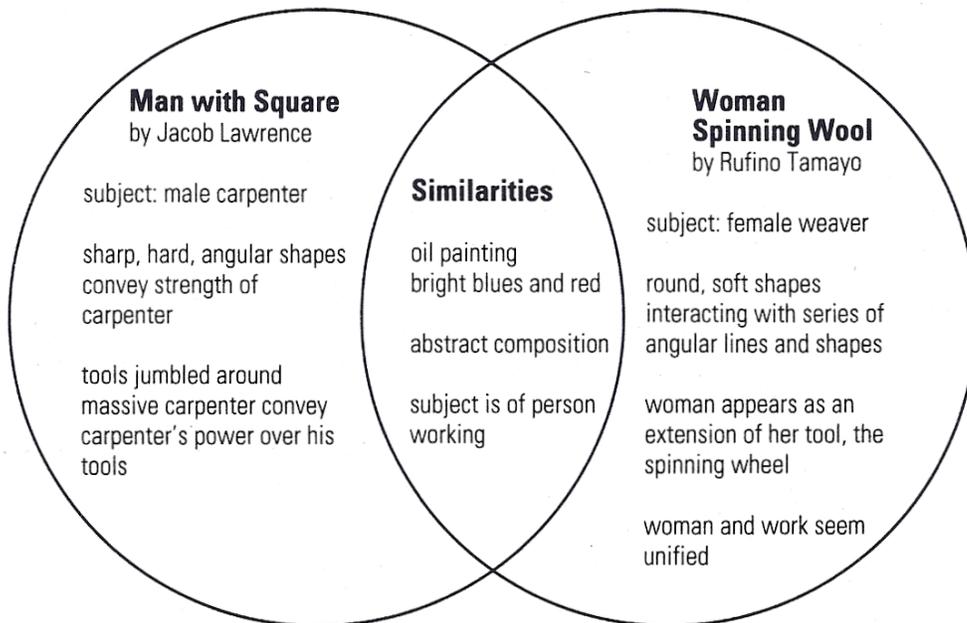
With these notes, begin to organize your description. Decide which form of organization will be more appropriate for your subject—spatial order or order of importance. Then write a strong topic sentence that contains your main idea about the work of art. Decide whether the topic sentence will be more effective at the beginning or end of your description. As you write your draft, use appropriate transitions to make clear your pattern of organization and the relationships among your ideas.

► Activities

1. Select a piece of art to describe. Using the guidelines above, take prewriting notes.
2. Decide what pattern of organization you will use in your description.
3. Write a strong topic sentence.
4. Draft your description, following your organizational plan and your prewriting notes.

Comparing and Contrasting Two Works of Art

Art reviewers often use comparison and contrast to discuss the similarities and differences between two works of art. Comparison-and-contrast writing is an effective way to present facts and information about art works that are somehow related, either in subject matter, method, or medium. There are several different techniques and tools you can use to explore the similarities and differences between two works of art. Here's how one writer used a Venn diagram to explore the similarities and differences between two paintings.



After exploring the similarities and differences between the two works of art, a writer may choose to present the information in a subject-by-subject or feature-by-feature arrangement, whichever seems more vivid for the readers.

In a subject-by-subject analysis, the writer first lists facts and information about one work of art and then the other.

In a feature-by-feature analysis, the writer discusses each feature individually, going back and forth between the two works of art.

► Activities

1. The writer chose to explore the similarities and differences of *Man with Square* and *Woman Spinning Wool* in a Venn diagram. On a separate sheet of paper, use another tool or technique to explore the same information.
2. Using the information in the Venn diagram, write a paragraph comparing and contrasting the two works of art. Use subject-by-subject or feature-by-feature organization. You may wish to do additional research on the two paintings.
3. Use a Venn diagram to explore the similarities and differences of two other works of art that interest you. Then write a comparison-contrast of the two works of art.

Comparing and Contrasting Two Artists

Comparing and contrasting two artists or two works of art—including fine art, music, and literature—is different from comparing and contrasting more objective subjects such as forms of government or biological species. Such objective subjects are compared and contrasted factually, on the basis of similar and different features. In contrast, when comparing and contrasting two artists' styles or two works of art, you might begin with factual features, but then you often go beyond to bring in your personal reactions and opinions. To begin a comparison of two artists' styles, use a comparison frame to organize your thoughts. Here's a frame that a student began for a comparison-contrast essay of two paintings—*The Biglen Brothers Racing*, by Thomas Eakins, and *The Boating Party*, by Mary Cassatt.

Categories	<i>The Biglen Brothers Racing</i> , by Thomas Eakins	<i>The Boating Party</i> , by Mary Cassatt
Subject of Painting	racing in a crew shell	leisure sailing
Characters	two oarsmen (real people—Barney and Jim Biglen)	male skipper with two passengers, a mother and child
Why is painting characteristic of artist?	realistic style; Eakins often painted sports scenes; boating was often his subject	impressionistic style; Cassatt's favorite subject and theme was motherhood
Features	exact details, almost like photograph; clear definition of muscles of oarsmen, shadows, reflections and ripples in water; realistic detail of sky and effect of sunlight; strong suggestion of motion of boat; no emotion shown	bright colors, no shadows; contours of human bodies and definition of water are only suggested. Motion is suggested through swelling of sail and wriggling of child. Emphasis on emotion—mother has hint of fear on face

Once you have completed your prewriting notes, plan the organizational frame of your essay. There are two ways to present your information—feature-by-feature or subject-by-subject. Then jot down notes on your personal reactions to the works of art.

Depending on the purpose of your essay, use your opinions and conclusions in different ways. If your purpose is to review and judge the paintings, work your overall personal reactions into your thesis statement. On the other hand, if your purpose is to describe the differences between realism and impressionism, weave your personal reactions into your supporting statements.

► Activities

1. Select two works of art to compare and contrast. Following the steps and models above, use graphic organizers to organize your prewriting notes.
2. Jot down your personal reactions to the works of art. Then establish purposes of the essay. On your organizational frame, use arrows to show where and how you will use your personal reactions.
3. Write a thesis statement in which you identify the subjects of your comparison-contrast essay and state your main idea. Then draft, revise, edit, and present.

Reviewing an Art Exhibit

The opening of a new exhibit in a museum or an art gallery is as carefully planned as any theatrical, sports, or music event. Although the art work on exhibit is the main focus, the manner in which it is exhibited is of vital importance. Exhibit designers plan presentations of collections and decide on a theme; they decide which art works should be grouped together and how they should be lit. In a museum a well-planned exhibit will entertain as well as inform the public; in an art gallery an effective exhibit should attract customers and persuade them to buy.

You might one day be asked to review an art exhibit, perhaps as a professional critic or as a guide to an out-of-town visitor. The following guidelines will help you plan and write your review.

- **State your opinion.** A good review is more than a statement such as “I really like this exhibit.” Begin with a statement that evaluates the exhibit and then express your opinion, using supporting details. Evaluate the exhibit using appropriate criteria—don’t judge an exhibit on the quality of the food served during opening night. Design, lighting, grouping, and other artistic elements are appropriate considerations. Consider also whether a museum exhibit meets the educational and entertainment needs of its visitors.
- **Organize the body of your review.** Use a logical method to organize the information in your review. Collect sufficient and appropriate information so that your opinions will be supported and your readers will see that your response is a thoughtful one. Don’t forget the basics—the name of the exhibit and the museum in which it is housed, its location, hours of operation, and price of admission.
- **Know your audience.** Use terms that are appropriate for your audience. Only a select audience would understand this statement: “These Baroque works are characterized by chiaroscuro and a great emphasis on verisimilitude and naturalism.” Focus on specifics that will interest your audience, and include personal reactions if they help make the review interesting and worth reading. Also, be helpful and professional; avoid humor or sarcasm that will offend either a reader or an artist.

► Activities

1. Clip a review of an art gallery or a visiting art exhibit from the newspaper. Critique the review, referring to the list above. Rewrite the review if you feel it does not sufficiently follow these guidelines.
2. Imagine that you have been asked to review an art exhibit. Use the guidelines above to write a review for an audience of your choice. To complete this assignment, you should attend an exhibit at an art gallery or museum. If this is not possible, base your review on information in a museum or gallery catalogue. Your review may be either positive or negative, but it must be supported by specific, accurate details.

Writing a Narrative About a Work of Art

Writers often use narrative techniques to write about works of art. Many works of art contain the elements necessary for a compelling narrative—interesting characters, a specific setting, and a plot that often contains a conflict. The conflict in a work of art may take many forms, as described in the following chart. The conflict may reflect the struggle between people and other forces depicted in the work of art, or it may reflect the artist’s own internal struggle.

Types of Conflicts	
Person Against Person:	one person struggling in some way with another person
Person Against Nature:	a person struggling against a force of nature
Person Against Society:	society or tradition in opposition to person
Person Against Self:	person struggling with inner thoughts
Nature Against Nature:	struggle of forces of nature

A narrative writer usually fleshes out the conflict before writing. One way to do this is to freewrite about the conflict and to generate a series of events that develop and resolve the conflict in the work of art. As you prepare to write a narrative, it’s important to keep asking yourself “What happens next?” Here’s how one writer used freewriting to develop and resolve the conflict in a narrative about a work of art.

Beneficent Rain by Chang Yü-ts’ai

The soft rounded edges of dark, ominous clouds transform into sharp jagged claws of a dragon; dragon’s serpentine body twists and winds across the sky, whips its tails washing away light; dragon’s claw grasps the sun and yanks it from the sky; the sun seems to shrink away, losing its power; light and warmth disappear; the dragon is in control; thunderous noise and fiery lightning flashes fill the sky; the dragon exerts power over the universe; rain will fall; a welcome rain that will benefit the dry parched earth and its people; when it’s over the dragon will retreat; power once more belongs to the sun; the earth will welcome the return of the sun; it awaits the next appearance of the mighty dragon who brings the beneficent rain

► Activities

1. Circle the events in the student’s freewriting that you think should be included in the narrative.
2. Based on the student’s freewriting notes, write a narrative about the work of art. You may make up information if necessary.
3. Identify the conflict in a work of art of your choice or in one assigned by your teacher. Freewrite for five minutes about the conflict. Then generate a series of events that you can use to develop the conflict. Write a brief narrative based on the work of art.

Answering an Art Essay Question

To answer essay questions you rely exclusively on two things: your knowledge of the subject and your ability to write an organized, coherent, and complete answer in a limited time.

Whatever the subject, read the question carefully and plan your response. Are you being asked more than one question? Are you asked to describe, analyze, compare? Begin by brainstorming and prewriting on scratch paper. Organize main ideas and key details in a rough outline, and then write a thesis sentence. Reread the question to be sure that you are answering it, and refer to your thesis sentence as you write to keep your ideas on track. Remember that your time is limited, so be specific and stick to important facts. Below is an art essay question and the results of a student's brainstorming.

Model

Write an essay in which you describe the style *art nouveau* and identify at least one artist known for her or his use of that style. Be sure to explain what characterizes art nouveau pieces—style, design, the media used—and describe the most significant features of the works done by the artist you have selected.

Art nouveau—around 1890 to 1910; supposed to be a totally new art form; from England, popular in France; name means new art; design/style: asymmetrical, long, ornate, elegant, flowing, twisting lines; milky blue and green colors popular; subjects: often flower stalks, vines, other flowing, natural objects (dragonflies, snakes), and tall, dreamy women; media: jewelry, interior decoration, buildings, illustrations, posters

Artist—Louis Tiffany—glassware such as vases, windows, lamps; some jewelry; U.S. citizen; lived 1848–1933; son of a famous jeweler; experimented with glass-coloring and glass-making techniques; influenced by Moroccan art; invented favrite glass—iridescent, silky-looking, richly colored (deep blues, purples, greens, and yellows); pieces of interesting shapes—mysterious, impressionistic; designed stained-glass screens and windows for public buildings, churches (St. John the Divine, New York)

► Activities

1. What is the student asked to do when answering this essay question (describe, analyze, compare) in the above model?
2. Of the facts and details brainstormed by the student, which are least important and probably unnecessary?
3. Write a thesis statement and develop an outline for the essay question above.
4. Complete the essay question by writing a two- or three-paragraph essay.