

## Formal Analysis Essay: Assignment Guide

This assignment is aimed for a survey class. It can be adapted to fit a course that covers the entire art history (e.g. BCC Art11) in one semester or a survey that is divided into two semesters. The assignment can also be adapted to use in a non-Western class (e.g. BCC Art 12). All you need to do is to pick a selection of the artworks that you would like your students to write about.

The assignment is scaffolded, and it uses a variety of techniques that help students to understand what exactly formal analysis is and how it differs from a simple description. It also teaches them how to design a simple thesis and support it with evidence drawn from the work. This is not a research paper assignment, and it is designed not to require the student to reference any outside sources.

I suggest that you hand out the final project sheet early on in the semester, so that the students can become familiar with the assignment and think about it or take notes throughout the semester.

The assignments are designed to be completed in the following order:

1. **What Is Formal Analysis?** - Since students often confuse formal analysis with description, and thesis statement with personal opinion, you should spend some time early in the semester explaining the differences.
2. **Building Formal Analysis Skills** - This handout consists of a list of suggested exercises that should be practiced regularly from the beginning of the semester. You may pick as many or as few as you want, but make sure to choose at least one since it will give your students plenty of opportunities to practice formal analysis skills.
3. **Outline** - This handout teaches the students how to organize their notes from the museum visit into an outline that will, in turn, help them write their first draft.
4. **Exploratory Essay** - Meant to be handed-out at least three weeks before the final assignment is due, this exercise allows students to identify the progress of their paper or areas they struggle with allowing ample time for remediation. The essay also helps the professor to identify the students that may need more supervised help and advice in advance.
5. **In-class Draft Outline Group Exercise** - This exercise is a replacement for the traditional peer-review. It allows the student peer-reviewers to focus on structure, logic, and flow of the argument and the supportive evidence instead of focusing on fixing grammar and punctuation as is often the case.

Make sure to announce the number of people in a single group in advance so that the students bring enough copies to the class.

## 6. Final Assignment

I suggest that you hand out the copy of the final assignment at the beginning of the semester. This usually makes students less stressed about the final paper. Make sure to hand out the final assignment and discuss it in detail again when the deadline is approaching.

## I What is formal analysis?

In short, formal analysis is an analysis of the form (work of art) that an artist produced. Formal analysis requires one to look closely and analyze such components of the artwork as:

- Line
- Shape
- Color
- Texture
- Mass
- Space
- Scale
- Composition

These characteristics give the artwork its form, expression, content, and meaning. For example, a pyramid conveys stability, while an inverted triangle - instability; red, orange, and yellow are seen as warm while blue or gray as cold.

Formal analysis assumes that an artwork is:

1. A constructed object
2. With a stable meaning
3. That can be extracted by studying the relationships between the elements of the work

By doing formal analysis we study these elements or properties in order to arrive at the meaning of the artwork.

### *Formal Analysis vs Description*

Formal analysis is not simply a description. Description is meant to report objective facts such as “the woman’s face is in profile,” “the sky is painted with thick blue strokes.” Description is factual but it lacks analysis. Formal analysis goes further to elucidate the meaning of the work and to argue a point. For example, “the wide-opened eyes fixated on the execution of the rebels convey the horror and fear of the public forced to observe it;” or “the large black circle placed in the upper part of canvas dominates the entire scene.” Description is an important part of formal analysis but in addition to it the writer has to show *how* the described object works.

The above explanation is based on Sylvan Barnet’s *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2005).

## II Building Formal Analysis Skills: Instructions for the Professor

After you discussed what formal analysis is and distributed the formal analysis explanation hand-out, you should give plenty of opportunities to your students to practice recognizing the difference between description and formal analysis. I suggest you choose some of the following exercises:

### Exercise 1

At the end of each class, show students a picture of an artwork that you discussed today and ask them to write one-sentence that formally analyzes that artwork. Collect the responses, look through them at home, and address any issues students may have at the next class meeting. If students are confused, pull some of the good and bad answers and have them identify the correct responses and tell why these responses are correct.

### Exercise 2

Make students keep a journal in which they do short *formal analysis* of an artwork of their choice you covered in class. You can collect the journal entries weekly or less often, and again, discuss the results with your class. The journal approach does not require any class time.

### Exercise 3

After the students decided on their choice of artwork for the final paper, but well before it is actually due, set apart some of your class time and put the students into three person groups. Ask that each member presents his or her choice of artwork and briefly state 5 formal analysis observations about that artwork. After the student goes, other members either give feedback on the formal analysis or ask presenter clarifying questions.

### Exercise 4

A couple weeks before the assignment is due, ask your students to submit a choice of their artwork together with 5 single-sentence formal analysis observations about the chosen pieces. You can check them very quickly and give students early feedback preventing major problems once they submit the final paper.

### Exercise 5

Students submit a written imagined dialogue they would have with an artist, who created the work, asking him or her questions that would result in a formal analysis-like answers. Alternatively, students submit a dialog they would have with a younger sibling or a friend unfamiliar with art, where the sibling or a friend asks questions about the descriptive elements of the artwork and the student explains how these function and what they mean.

### III Outline of the Draft

Hand in an outline of your draft for the formal analysis essay. The following instructions will help you in this assignment.

**1. Review your notes:**

After you come back from the museum with your notes ready, reread them and add anything new that has occurred to you since then. Then, create a couple of categories into which your notes may fall. For example: background, material, realism, idealism, abstraction etc. You may want to discard some cards that don't fit your major categories. You want to keep your essay focused and clear to the reader, so avoid any distractions!

**2. Organize your notes:**

Transfer your notes to notecards. Arrange the notecards using keywords into a sequence of index-cards that seems the most reasonable to you. For example, following the introduction you may want to start with the background, then with general information about the particular style, and then proceed to more specific points, ending with conclusion.

**3. Prepare preliminary outline:**

Based on the index-cards create an outline. Write down your major points in order in which you want to present them and then scrutinize this outline. If the main points still seem to coherently follow one from the other. You may want to rearrange, add, or cross out some at this point.

#### IV Exploratory Essay: Skill-building Exercise

As you reread your notes, outlines, and look over your formal analysis exercises write an exploratory essay in which you narrate in first-person chronological account of the evolution of your ideas (e.g. At first I thought ..., but then I discovered that ...). In your paper try to discover what will be the main idea of your paper - think about what made you choose this particular artwork as the focus of your paper. What is significant about this particular piece? Also mention what are your accomplishments to date and what are you still struggling with regarding your final paper.

## V In-class Draft Outline: Peer-review Exercise

Bring to class ..... copies of your draft and share them with each member of your group. Now, read through each draft that you received from your peer. As you read, outline, paragraph by paragraph, what each of the paragraphs a) says and b) does.

The following example is an outline of the example essay draft you received earlier (keep in mind that this is only a suggestion - multiple answers are valid):

1. a) Historical background and brief description  
b) Introduces the artwork
2. a) The condition of the artwork  
b) Prepares the analysis by providing very detailed description
3. a) The geometry of the work  
b) Introduces the thesis, concerning the basic overall geometry
4. a) Significant details  
b) Modifies (refines) the argument
5. a) The head  
b) Compares the realism of the head with the breasts, in order to make the point that the head is more detailed
6. a) The pose  
b) Argues that the pose is not static
7. a) Geometric, yet individual  
b) Concludes by summarizing

(From: S. Barnet's *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*)

Take a couple of moments to think about whether you understand the flow of the essay and if the structure and the way paragraphs follow one from the other makes sense. Do you clearly understand what the writer is trying to argue? Does he or she do it effectively? Jot down your responses.

Once everyone is finished discuss each essay with the outlines on the group's forum. Share your impressions with the author and other peer-reviewers and don't hesitate to ask questions - the author may find them very helpful in clarifying his or her ideas.

## VI Formal Analysis Essay: Final Assignment

Imagine that you will deliver this paper at an undergraduate student conference. Assume that your audience is neither familiar with this assignment nor with your artwork and that they will attend your session because they found your title to be interesting.

Write an 800 to 1100-word long formal analysis essay of an artwork you chose from the attached list. Please include the number of words on the title page and attach an image of your artwork at the end of the paper. Remember that the formal analysis is not just a description, but requires you to draw inferences and meaning based on your observation of the formal elements of the artwork.

The introduction to your paper should pose the question or problem that your paper will address and which will also attract the reader's attention. Your proposed answer to this question, stated in the first paragraph in a single sentence, will serve as your thesis statement for this essay. At the end of your essay, don't forget to include a conclusion that summarizes your overall argument.

This assignment does not require use of any outside sources (do not quote, footnote, or rephrase any sources in your essay - just focus on your argument).

This paper requires a visit to either the Metropolitan Museum or the Museum of the Modern Art, depending on your choice of the artwork.

List of works:

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM:

1. Terracotta stirrup jar with octopus  
Accession Number: 53.11.6, Gallery 151
2. Bronze statuette of a rider wearing an elephant skin  
Accession Number: 55.11.11, Gallery 163
4. Marble statue of a lion  
Accession Number: 09.221.3, Gallery 156
5. Marble statue of a woman  
Accession Number: 10.210.21, Gallery 153
6. Statue of Kaipunesut  
Accession Number: 26.2.7, Gallery 103
7. Sarcophagus of Harkhebit  
Accession Number: 07.229.1a-b, Gallery 123
8. Mosaic Head of Christ L.2000.80



9. Casket with Warriors and Dancers  
Accession Number: 17.190.239, Gallery 300
10. Stonecross from Armenia L.2008.11
11. Virgin and Child  
Accession Number: 17.190.170, Gallery 306
13. Bird-Shaped Brooch  
Accession Number: 17.191.164, Gallery 301
14. Relief panel from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal  
Accession Number: 31.72.1, Gallery 401
16. Terracotta statuette of woman with bird face  
Accession Number: 74.51.1548, Gallery 173
17. Pietro Lorenzetti, *The Crucifixion*, 1340s;  
Accession Number: 2002.436 (Gallery 602)
18. Bronzino, *Portrait of a Young Man*, 1530s;  
Accession Number: 29.100.16 (Gallery 608)
19. Rembrandt, *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer*, c. 1653;  
Accession Number: 61.198 (Gallery 614)
20. Claude Monet, *Haystacks*, 1891;  
Accession Number: 29.100.109 (Gallery 819)
21. Edgar Degas, *Rehearsal of Ballet on Stage*, 1874;  
Accession Number: 29.160.26 (Gallery 816)
22. Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Madame Grand (Catherine Noele Worlée)*, c. 1783;  
Accession Number: 50.135.2 (Gallery 601)
23. Eugène Delacroix, *The Abduction of Rebecca*, 1846;  
Accession Number: 03.30 (Gallery 801)
- Artworks in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA):
24. Vincent van Gogh, *The Olive Trees*, 1889;  
Accession Number: 581.1998
25. Auguste Rodin, *Monument to Balzac*, 1898;  
Accession Number: 28.1955 (it is outside in the garden)
26. Pablo Picasso, *Girl with a Mandolin*, 1910;  
Accession Number: 966.1979

27. Roy Lichtenstein, *Girl with a Ball*, 1961  
Accession Number: 421.1981

Advice on your trip to the museum:

Note that entrance to the Metropolitan Museum is based on donations - that means that you can pay as much as 1 cent since the \$20 fee is just a suggested price, which you do not need to pay. Entrance to MoMA is free for CUNY students - you just need to show your ID at the desk.

Take the hand-out to the museum and while you are looking at your chosen artwork ask yourself questions and take notes. In case you forget how given artwork looks like you can refer to a picture in a book or on-line to refresh your memory - but remember that it is not the same experience as you would have in person! This is why you absolutely need to go to the museum.

Some questions to ask while you are looking at an artwork in the museum:

- What does the artist emphasize visually? What first attracts the viewer's attention?
- What is the condition of the work? Was it restored? If so, what parts are original?
- What is the material used? How does it affect the structure (any limitations or advantages)? Is it typical, unusual, cheap, or expensive material?
- What can you say about the surface and its tactile qualities?
- How does the artist emphasize this feature visually? Through scale, line, color, etc?
- Is there an underlying rhythm, pattern or geometric structure to the composition?
- Does the composition seem unified - do the elements appear integrated or separate and distinct from one another?
- How can the emotion or idea evoked by this piece be described? How is this achieved visually?
- What is the viewer's position in relation to the work? Is the composition large or small in scale? Is it horizontal or vertical?
- How is color used? Are the colors bright? Where are the brightest colors? The darkest colors? The lightest colors? Is there a wide range or a narrow range of color? Do the colors create a sense of calm or a sense of drama and excitement? Are they used to emphasize certain parts of the work of art?
- Can you see the marks of the tools - pencil, brush, etc. Does the work seem highly finished or rough and unfinished? How do these qualities contribute to the overall effect of the work?
- Is there a strong contrast between light and shade? Does this help to create the illusion of a three-dimensional space? Or do the shading effects emphasize the picture plane, reminding the viewer that the surface is flat?
- How are forms defined - through line or shading?