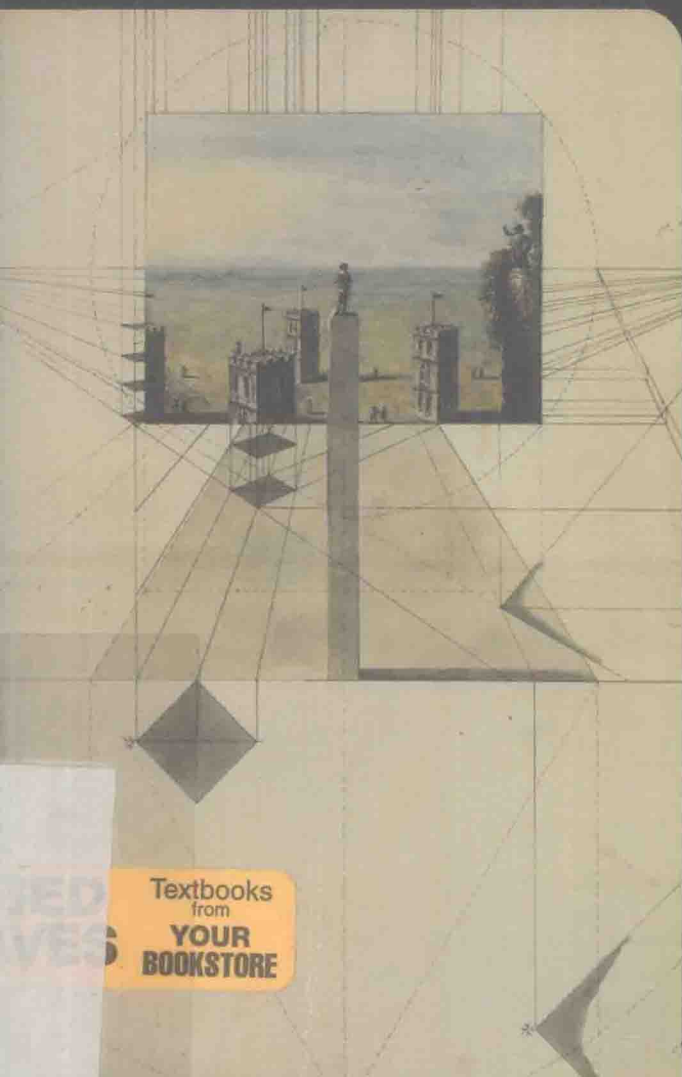


*Eighth Edition*

A SHORT GUIDE  
TO WRITING ABOUT

Art



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SYLVAN  
BARNET

# *A Short Guide to Writing about Art*

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*EIGHTH EDITION*

**SYLVAN BARNET**  
*Tufts University*



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# *How to Use This Book*

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Here is a slightly fuller and perhaps more orderly guide to using this book:

**If you need help in getting ideas down on paper, consult**

Chapter 1 (the discussion of the audience as a collaborator)

**If you need help in getting ideas about a topic, consult**

Chapter 2 (on pictures—drawing, painting, photography—  
sculpture, architecture)

**If you are writing a comparison, consult**

Chapter 3

**If you are writing an entry for an exhibition catalog, consult**

Chapter 4

**If you are revising a draft, consult**

Checklist on inside of front cover

**If you are writing a review of an exhibition, consult**

Chapter 5

**If you want a quick review of how to write an essay, consult**

Chapter 6

**If you are especially concerned with shaping sentences and  
paragraphs, consult**

Chapter 7

**If you are writing a research paper, consult**

Chapter 10

**If you are concerned with documentation, consult**

Chapter 11

**If you are preparing for an examination, consult**

Chapter 12

**If you are uncertain about the meaning of an instructor's  
annotation, consult**

The last page of the book

# Preface

---

Another book for the student of art to read? Well, everyone knows that students today do not write as well as they used to. Probably they never did, but it is a truth universally acknowledged (by English teachers) that the cure is *not* harder work from instructors in composition courses; rather, the only cure is a demand, on the part of the entire faculty, that students in all classes write decently. But instructors outside of departments of English understandably say that they lack the time—and perhaps the skill—to teach writing in addition to, say, art.

This book may offer a remedy. Students who read it—and it is short enough to be read in addition to whatever texts the instructor regularly requires—should be able to improve their essays

- by getting ideas—both about works of art and about approaches to art, from the first five chapters (“Writing about Art,” “Analysis,” “Writing a Comparison,” “Writing an Entry in an Exhibition Catalog,” “Writing a Review of an Exhibition”)—and from Chapter 8 (“Some Critical Approaches”)
- by studying the principles of writing explained in Chapter 7, “Style in Writing” (e.g., on tone, paragraphing, and concreteness), and Chapters 9, 10, and 11 (“Art-Historical Research,” “Writing a Research Paper,” and “Manuscript Form”)
- by studying the short models throughout the book, which give the student a sense of some of the ways in which people talk about art

As Robert Frost said, writing is a matter of having ideas. This book tries to help students to have ideas by suggesting questions they may ask themselves as they contemplate works of art. After all, instructors want papers that *say* something, papers with substance, not papers whose only virtue is that they are neatly typed and that the footnotes are in the proper form.

Consider a story that Giambologna (1529–1608) in his old age told about himself. The young Flemish sculptor (his original name was Jean de Boulogne), having moved to Rome, went to visit the aged Michelangelo. To show what he could do, Giambologna brought with him a carefully finished, highly polished wax model of a sculpture. The master took

the model, crushed it, shaped it into something very different from Giambologna's original, and handed it back, saying, "Now learn the art of modeling before you learn the art of finishing." This story about Michelangelo as a teacher is harrowing, but it is also edifying (and it is pleasant to be able to say that Giambologna reportedly told it with delight). The point of telling it here is not to recommend a way of teaching; the point is that a highly finished surface is all very well, but we need substance first of all. A good essay, to repeat, says something.

*A Short Guide to Writing about Art* contains notes and sample essays by students and numerous model paragraphs by students and by published scholars such as Rudolf Arnheim, Albert Elsen, Mary D. Garrard, Anne Hollander, and Leo Steinberg. These examples, as well as the numerous questions that are suggested, should help students to understand the sorts of things people say, and the ways they say them, when writing about art. After all, people *do* write about art, not only to satisfy a college requirement but also to communicate ideas in learned journals, catalogs, and even in newspapers and magazines.

## A NOTE ON THE EIGHTH EDITION

I have been in love with painting ever since I became conscious of it at the age of six. I drew some pictures which I thought fairly good when I was fifty, but really nothing I did before the age of seventy was of any value at all. At seventy-three I have at last caught every aspect of nature—birds, fish, animals, insects, trees, grasses, all. When I am eighty I shall have developed still further, and will really master the secrets of art at ninety. When I reach one hundred my art will be truly sublime, and my final goal will be attained around the age of one hundred and ten, when every line and dot I draw will be imbued with life.

—Hokusai (1760–1849)

Probably all artists share Hokusai's self-assessment. And so do all writers of textbooks. Each edition of this book seemed satisfactory to me when I sent the manuscript to the publisher, but with the passing not of decades but of only a few months I detected inadequacies, and I wanted to say new things. This eighth edition, therefore, not only includes eighth thoughts about many topics discussed in the preceding editions but it also introduces new topics. (All writers—professors as well as undergraduates—should post at their desks the words from *Worstward Ho* that Samuel Beckett posted at his: "Try again. Fail again. Fail better.")

The emphasis is still twofold—on *seeing* and *saying*, or on getting ideas about art (Chapters 1–6) and on presenting those ideas effectively in writing (Chapters 7–12)—but this edition includes new thoughts about these familiar topics, as well as thoughts about new topics. Small but I think important revisions—here a sentence or two, there a paragraph or two—have been made throughout the book, as well as some extensive additions. Topics that are either new or are now treated at greater length include

- avoiding plagiarism
- using electronic sources
- writing a catalog entry

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am fortunate in my many debts. James Cahill, Sarah Blick, Madeline Harrison Caviness, Robert Herbert, Naomi Miller, and Elizabeth de Sabato Swinton generously showed me some of their examinations, topics for essays, and guidelines for writing papers. I have received invaluable help also from those who read part or all of the manuscript of the first edition, or who made suggestions while I was preparing the revised editions. The following people called my attention to omissions, excesses, infelicities, and obscurities: Jane Aaron, Mary Clare Altenhofen, Howard Barnet, Peter Barnet, Mark H. Beers, Pat Bellanca, Morton Berman, Sarah Blick, Peggy Blood, Lisa Buboltz, William Burto, Ruth Butler, Rebecca Butterfield, James Cahill, William E. Cain, Richard Carp, Janet Carpenter, Charles Christensen, Fumiko Cranston, Whitney Davis, Margaret Fields Denton, Eugene Dwyer, Gail Geiger, Diane Goode, Carma R. Gorman, Louise K. Greiff, Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, Anna Hammond, Maxwell Hearn, Julius Held, Leslie Hennessey, Heidi J. Hornik, Joseph M. Hutchinson, Eugene J. Johnson, Deborah Martin Kao, Laura Kaufman, Samantha Kavky, Leila Kinney, Susan Kuretsky, Arturo Lindsay, Elizabeth Anne McCauley, Sara J. MacDonald, Janice Mann, Jody Maxmin, Sarah E. McCormick, Robert Munman, Julie Nicoletta, Jennifer Purtle, Sheryl Reiss, Patricia Rogers, John M. Rosenfield, Leland Roth, James M. Saslow, John M. Schnorrenberg, Diana Scott, Annie Shaver-Crandell, Jack J. Spector, Connie Stewart, Marcia Stubbs, Ruth Thomas, Gary Tinterow, Stephen K. Urice, Jonathan Weinberg, Tim Whalen, and Paul J. Zelanski. I have adopted many of their suggestions verbatim.

The extremely generous contributions of Anne McCauley, James M. Saslow, and Ruth Thomas must be further specified. McCauley wrote the material on photography, Saslow the material on gay and lesbian art criticism, and Thomas the material on library resources. In each instance the job turned out to be more time-consuming than they or I had anticipated, and I am deeply grateful to them for staying with it. I am also indebted to the College Art Association, which granted me permission to reprint the *Art Bulletin Style Guide*, and to William E. Cain and to Marcia Stubbs, for letting me use some material that had appeared in books we collaborated on.

I also wish to thank the reviewers whose comments helped me revise this edition: Perry Chapman, University of Delaware; Jason Kuo, University of Maryland; Thomas Larose, Virginia State University; Charles Mack, University of South Carolina; Julie Nicoletta, University of Washington/Tacoma; Allison Sauls, Missouri Western State College; and Virginia Spivey, University of North Carolina/Ashville.

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SYLVAN BARNET



I saw the things which have been brought to the King from the new golden land: a sun all of gold a whole fathom broad, and a moon all of silver of the same size, also two rooms full of the armour of the people there, and all manner of wondrous weapons of theirs, harness and darts, wonderful shields, strange clothing, bedspreads, and all kinds of wonderful objects of various uses, much more beautiful to behold than prodigies. These things were all so precious that they have been valued at one hundred thousand gold florins. All the days of my life I have seen nothing that has gladdened my heart so much as these things, for I saw amongst them wonderful works of art, and I marvelled at the subtle talents of men in foreign lands. Indeed, I cannot express all that I thought there.

—Albrecht Dürer, in a journal entry of 27 August 1520,  
writing about Aztec treasures sent by Motecuhzoma  
to Cortés in 1519, and forwarded  
by Cortés to Charles V

Painting cannot equal nature for the marvels of mountains and water,  
but nature cannot equal painting for the marvels of brush and ink.

—Dong Qichang (1555–1636)

What you see is what you see.

—Frank Stella, in an interview, 1966

The surface bootlessness of talking about art seems matched by a depth  
necessity to talk about it endlessly.

—Clifford Geertz, 1976

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