

The Art of Writing about Art



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THE ART OF WRITING ABOUT ART

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THE ART OF WRITING
ABOUT ART

P R E F A C E

We have come to this project from the shared experience of teaching at the same college in our respective fields of art history and English. As colleagues, we felt, and still do feel, that students in all disciplines, not just English, should be required to write and that their instructors should hold these writing assignments to high standards. There are at least two problems with converting this concept into reality. First, instructors do not have time to teach writing in addition to their own subjects, and are therefore often inclined to evaluate papers more on content and less on the quality of the writing itself. The second problem is that although many students desire to write better papers, they do not know how. Writing about art, in particular, demands advanced skills not only in college-level composition, but also in verbalizing the experience of art—the historical, social, economic and political forces that shape art and artists; art theory; and the interplay between artist and viewer. We feel that instructors and students alike need a comprehensive writing guide to accompany art appreciation and art history textbooks such as Lois Fichner-Rathus's *Understanding Art* and Gardner's *Art through the Ages*. Thus is born *The Art of Writing about Art*.

The Art of Writing about Art begins by teaching the principles of effective writing, placing particular emphasis upon the formulation of a clear thesis statement, written in the appropriate mode of discourse. We advocate that students organize their essays according to points of proof—reasons why they believe their thesis to be true. Such a simple frame tends to generate focused, organized essays on art, as well as essays containing insightful and complex ideas that would be difficult to comprehend without a discernible shape. In this regard, art and writing are allies, both driven by the composition of elements toward the advancement of ideas.

This textbook also provides students with the requisite vocabulary for verbalizing the art experience. The unwieldy task of writing about art becomes manageable when students possess the terminology to discuss the artwork in terms of its components, such as line, perspective, iconography, medium, and style. Students find that concentrating on one component at a time generates more words, more ideas, more understanding of the art than they would have expected.

The Art of Writing about Art further assists students by providing numerous examples of writing about art, produced by arts and humanities students, artists, and professional writers. Examples include formal analyses, expository and argumentative essays, exhibition reviews, essay examinations and research papers. The book assists students in the planning stages

by offering numerous topic suggestions, library and Internet research techniques, templates for planning and outlining essays, exercises in evaluating the workability of thesis statements, and advice in organizing the evidence for their assertions. The book aids students in developing introductions, conclusions, and body paragraphs; citing sources in both the MLA and footnote numbering documentation styles; and in the finishing touches of writing titles, revising, editing, proofreading, and formatting papers. A handbook uses art-based examples to demonstrate principles of grammar and style particular to the discipline of writing about art.

In combining these two applications—composition and critical inquiry into the discipline of art—*The Art of Writing about Art* meets both the needs of arts and humanities students and the needs of instructors whose valuable class time should be devoted not to teaching writing, but to what they teach best—the various forms of art and its role in our cultural heritage.

We would like to thank all of our contributing students as well as the following reviewers for their suggestions: Stephanie S. Dickey, Herron School of Art, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis; Eloise Augiola, University of Alabama; Judy Kay Knopf, Jefferson State Community College; H. Perry Chapman, University of Delaware; Bernadine Heller-Greenman, Florida International University; and Joanne Mannell Noel, Montana State University. We would also like to thank all the people at Harcourt who assisted us with this project: John Swanson, acquisitions editor; Peggy Howell, development editor; Laura Hanna, senior project editor; Sherry Ahlstrom, art director; and Linda McMillan, production manager. We would like to extend special thanks as well to Richard Morrissey for his enthusiastic support.

INTRODUCTION

WHY WRITE ABOUT ART?

Why write about art? After you have seen the artwork, what's the point of transferring that essentially visual experience to a written form? Upon examination, it becomes clear that art lovers derive enormous benefits from writing about art. Knowing that you are viewing art with a writing assignment in mind forces you to look much more carefully at the art. The nature of the exercise itself mandates that you slow down and focus on the work in front of you. You find yourself noticing elements that you might not have noticed had you not been *looking* with *writing* in mind. Information that you have learned in your art appreciation and art history classes comes to mind as you consider what you will write about the work. Then, as the evaluative process develops, you form questions about the art that will undoubtedly assist your written piece.

By seeing more deeply, you understand the work more fully, and your appreciation of the art will intensify. This careful looking will allow you to articulate your perceptions to the reader and will lead to specific word choices, instead of vague and general ones. In essence, you instruct yourself before instructing your readers, enhancing the experience for all concerned. Through your written words, the passion and creativity that went into the artist's vision can be conveyed to the reader, keeping the love and appreciation of art alive in our world. And, after all, what's a world without art and those who love it?

HOW WILL THIS BOOK HELP?

As students enrolled in art appreciation, art history, and even art studio classes, you are frequently required to write papers. It is unlikely that your professor will take class time to go through writing instructions, yet you will be expected to write clear, cogent papers. *The Art of Writing about Art* will assist you in tailoring your writing to the particular language and concepts of art and to the considerations one takes into account when approaching a writing assignment about art. This book will introduce you not only to the language and tenets of art itself, but also to the areas of brainstorming, organizing, developing, and polishing your essays, breaking the writing process down into small, manageable tasks and providing numerous examples and writing suggestions. In essence, *The Art of Writing about Art* will serve as your personal art and writing tutor, combining the two disciplines to assist you in any writing assignment about art.

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PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE WRITING

The Four Modes of Discourse

Narration
Description
Exposition
Argument

Types of Writing about Art

Essays
Exhibition Reviews
Research Papers
The Artist's Statement
Museum and Gallery Labels
Catalogue Entries

Approaches to Art Criticism

Diaristic
Formalistic
Contextualist
Psychoanalytical
Marxist
Feminist
Multicultural

The Process for Writing about Art

Planning
Writing
Revising
Editing
Proofreading
Formatting

Kindred spirits, art and writing spring from the same well of inspiration, the desire for personal expression. Eons ago an artist sauntered into a deeply recessed chamber of a cave and, with bristle brush and ocher, set about painting a life-size image of a bison on the wall, an image that has survived through the centuries. William Faulkner explains that same urge from the writer's point of view: "Really the writer [. . .] knows he has a short span of life, that the day will come when he must pass through the wall of oblivion, and he wants to leave a scratch on that wall—Kilroy was here—that somebody a hundred, or a thousand years later will see."¹ For whatever reasons, both artists and writers desire to leave a mark, to create an image, to communicate some idea. And in the process, they often leave something for posterity, a creation for all of us to ponder and enjoy.

Effective writing about art can be achieved through many methods. Most often, the effectiveness of your writing depends upon understanding your audience and purpose and adjusting your tone and style accordingly. An informal style is appropriate in many settings; a formal style is more often appropriate in academic writing. Effective writing also depends upon your understanding of certain principles, such as the differences between descriptive writing and expository writing, the qualities of a workable thesis, and the concept of development. The purpose of this chapter is to explain the terms and concepts that will be mentioned throughout this book and that, through familiarity, you will use to your advantage in the creation of essays and research papers on art.

THE FOUR MODES OF DISCOURSE

Most linguists agree that when we engage in discourse, that is, when we communicate either verbally, in writing, or even in body language, we do so in one of the four modes of discourse—**narration**, **description**, **exposition**, or **argument**. Your papers about art will probably be written in one of the latter three modes, but it is easier to understand exactly what that means when all four modes are defined and explained.

NARRATION

Narration is storytelling. A narrative may be either fiction or nonfiction. In either case, a narrative tells what happened. Generally, there is conflict in a narrative; someone must overcome or be overcome by some force or obstacle. Much art arises from stories. The Greek sculpture of Laocoön and his sons from the Hellenistic period, for example, depicts a scene from Virgil's *Aeneid*. Laocoön, a Trojan priest, had tried to warn the Trojans against bringing the Greeks' wooden horse inside the city walls. The gods who favored the Greeks in their war against the Trojans sent a pair of sea serpents to punish Laocoön. The sculpture captures the moment in which Laocoön and his two sons are strangled and bitten by the serpents. If you were writing an essay on the sculpture, you would likely include the story of Laocoön, but the bulk of the essay would be written in one of the following three modes of discourse.

DESCRIPTION

Often, the definition of a **descriptive essay** is "an essay that tells how a person, place, or thing is perceived by the five senses." For our purposes, this definition is too narrow because it implies that only tangible things can be described. Intangibles, such as your feelings as you stand before an artwork,

can also be described or you could describe an artist's character, which is intangible, rather than his appearance. It would be a descriptive statement, for example, to say that "Caravaggio was temperamental." You could also describe an action, such as Jackson Pollock's technique of dripping and splattering. You might describe the historical context in which a work of art was produced. Even divulging another person's opinion is descriptive writing. For example, if you write that "Picasso disdained nonrepresentational art, remarking that it was inconceivable to work without a recognizable subject," you are writing descriptively. You are describing Picasso's opinion, not your own. Only when you are advancing your own opinion are you engaged in either exposition or argument.

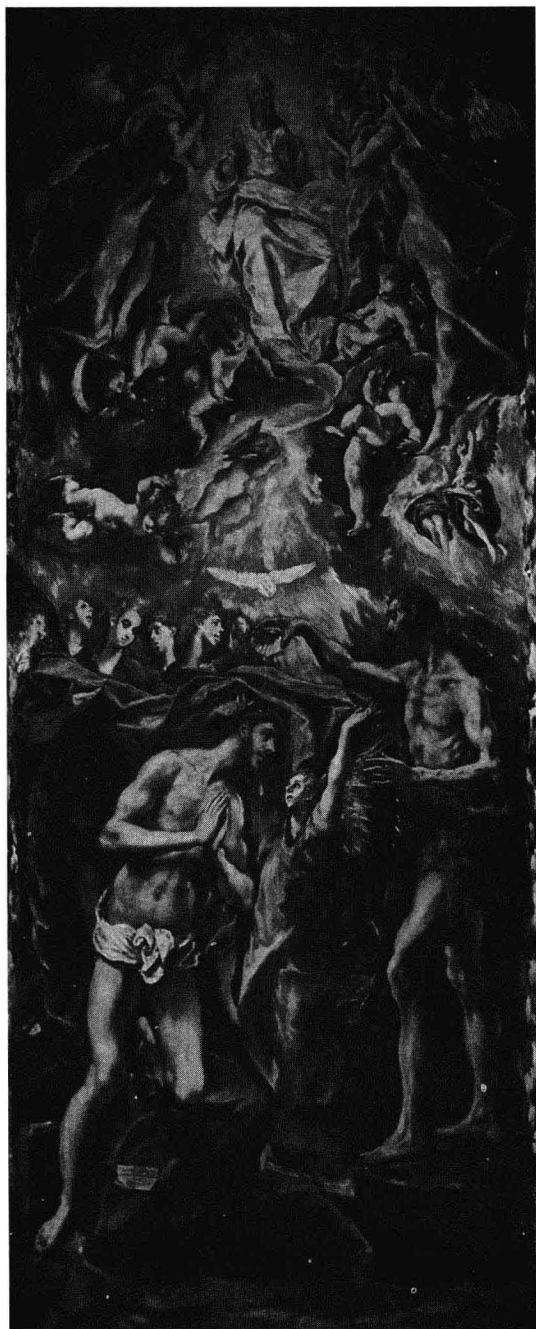
In short, descriptive writing divulges both abstract information and concrete information objectively. The following paragraph from historian Barbara Tuchman's book, *Practicing History*, is descriptive:

Embellishment was integral to the construction [of Gothic cathedrals]. Reims is populated by five thousand statues of saints, prophets, kings and cardinals, bishops, knights, ladies, craftsmen and commoners, devils, animals and birds. Every type of leaf known in northern France is said to appear in the decoration. In carving, stained glass, and sculpture the cathedrals displayed the art of medieval hands, and the marvel of these buildings is permanent even when they no longer play a central role in everyday life. Rodin said he could feel the beauty and presence of Reims even at night when he could not see it. "Its power," he wrote, "transcends the senses so that the eye sees what it sees not."²

EXPOSITION

Exposition (sometimes called **analysis**) is the mode of discourse that evaluates, interprets, or speculates. It differs from description in that **inference** is at its core. An inference is a conclusion derived from facts, but it is not itself a fact. It is a guess or a theory, albeit an educated one. If, for example, your classmate finishes a midterm exam early and walks out of the room with a huge smile on her face, you might infer that she is happy with her performance on the exam. You could be wrong, of course. She might not have known any of the answers but feel elated over her free tickets to the Matisse exhibition at the museum that afternoon. Your inference, however, given the circumstances, is a reasonable, educated one.

An inference is the result of **inductive reasoning**. Inductive reasoning moves from specific to general: you are in possession of some specific facts, and from them you move to a conclusion or inference. That move is called an **inductive leap**. Your inference is considered valid when there are enough facts in support of it to convince an educated, sympathetic, yet skeptical audience. If your inference is based on scant evidence, you'll be accused of "jumping to conclusions," as the common expression goes. In the foregoing example, the pieces of evidence that you put together were the relative importance of the exam to the student's final grade, the quick finishing of the



1-1 El Greco, *Baptism of Christ*, 1608–1614. Oil on canvas, 330 cm x 211 cm. Hospital de San Juan Bautista de Afuera, Toledo.