



Writing About
the Humanities

Robert DiYanni

**WRITING ABOUT
THE
HUMANITIES**

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For Bud Therien and Phil Miller

PREFACE

Writing About the Humanities is designed for students in introductory humanities courses, but it can be used by students in introductory literature and art history courses as well. The first half of the book—Chapters 1 through 4—covers general issues in writing about the humanities disciplines, including how to respond to, interpret, and evaluate different types of artworks. The second half of the book—Chapters 5 through 8—focuses more specifically on writing in literature and the arts, as well as on the particulars of writing with and documenting sources. An appendix on writing essay examinations concludes the book.

Among the book's distinctive and practical features are the following:

- Consideration of multiple approaches to artworks, including responding, interpreting, and evaluating
- An approach to interpretation that includes the steps of observing, connecting, inferring, and concluding.
- A set of guidelines that summarize the key features of the writing process: drafting, organizing, revising, editing, proofreading, and comparing
- Writing exercises and assignments
- Sample student papers in various disciplines
- Examples of professional writing in different disciplines
- Critical perspectives exemplified
- Guidance in researching and writing research papers
- Attention to using the Internet as a resource
- Reproduction of works of literature and art for analysis and writing

For assistance with *Writing About the Humanities* I would like to thank my colleague Janetta Rebold Benton, coauthor of *Arts and Culture: An Introduction to the Humanities*, for which this book has been designed as a companion. Thanks to Bud Therien, Publisher of Prentice-Hall Humanities, for sponsoring the book and supporting it.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife and best friend, Mary Hammond DiYanni, whose loving support continues to mean more to me than anything. And I wish to acknowledge the book's dedicatees, men whose respect for books and whose love of the arts are supremely evident in all they do.

Robert DiYanni

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WRITING ABOUT THE HUMANITIES

1 An Approach to Writing About the Humanities

Why write about works of art? For these reasons at least: first, because writing about a work of art leads us to read, observe, or listen to it more attentively, to notice characteristics about it we might overlook in a more casual reading, looking, or hearing. Second, because writing about works of art stimulates us to think about them. Putting words on paper provokes thought, gets our minds into gear. Third, we may wish to clarify our *feeling* about a work of art, as well as our *thinking*. We may wish to express what a particular work of art prompts us to think or feel, perhaps to endorse the ideas it conveys, perhaps to take exception to its subject, form, or execution. Writing about a work of art empowers us by allowing us to absorb it into our knowledge and experience.

This chapter presents an approach to works of art and ways to write about them. It encourages you to ask questions about the works you read, look at, and listen to—different kinds of questions, which lead to different kinds of responses. Three types of questions are essential:

- Questions that invite your *reaction* to the works you read, view, or hear
- Questions that encourage you to *interpret* those works
- Questions that require you to *evaluate* them

These types of questions and their associated forms of response lead to three ways of writing about works of art:

- Writing to understand works of art
- Writing to explain works of art
- Writing to evaluate works of art

In writing to understand works of art we are concerned primarily with how to make sense of them for ourselves. Our emphasis is on responding to the works emotionally as well as acquiring some sense of their qualities and power. The kind of writing associated with these goals is exploratory, and may assume the forms of freewriting, annotating, listing, and making notes.

In writing to explain works of art, we are concerned largely with interpretation, with making inferences based on our observations about artworks. (An inference is a statement about the unknown that is based on the known or the observed.) This type of writing to explain is more formal than the informal types of writing you do to understand a work of art for yourself. It is also more explanatory than exploratory.

In writing to evaluate works of art, we are concerned primarily with considering their value and their values. We make judgments about their quality, measuring them against aesthetic criteria and considering the social, moral, and cultural values they reflect, display, or endorse. Our emphasis in writing to evaluate is to arrive at conclusions about how we value works of art and why we value them as we do.

RESPONDING

When we listen to a song, watch a film, look at a photograph or painting, read a poem or story, or view a sunset, something happens to us. We feel something. Our emotions are stirred. Our thoughts are stimulated. In short, we react.

Consider, for example, a recent occasion when you did one of these things. Can you describe what you felt? Can you explain what it was about listening to that song, reading that poem or story, seeing that painting, watching that movie that moved you to feel what you did, that stimulated you to begin thinking? Think of some text, some work of music,

literature, art, or film to which you responded strongly—one that made you think or feel deeply. Most likely that work, whatever it was, has become part of you. It has become what we might call an “identity touchstone,” because it expresses something important to you as an individual. In some personal and powerful way, you have made that work your own.

Interestingly enough, you may very likely discover that others have made that same work or text their own—even though they may not have responded to it exactly as you did, though they may have seen in it things other than those you saw. Regardless of how others view this work or what they make of it as they appropriate it for their own identity, you have probably made it a part of your own inner life. In fact, depending upon how powerfully you were affected, the particular work you have identified may have been for you a door opening out to other experiences or kinds of knowledge. Or to change our image, it may have provided a key to unlock your understanding of the world, other people, or yourself. It may have provided you with a standard by which to judge other similar works or a frame through which you perceive and understand your experience.

Now think of some text or work that, upon first encounter, you didn’t understand. Perhaps it was a painting you looked at or a poem or novel you read. Perhaps it was a song whose lyrics puzzled you or a film you couldn’t make much sense of. You may have dismissed it as boring or stupid or meaningless. And perhaps, for you at the time, it was. Or you may have felt that there was indeed something to the work, even though you had trouble figuring it out. Such a questioning of your response is healthy and valuable, primarily because it starts you thinking about both the text and your reactions to it. On one hand, it invites you to reflect on yourself, on why you didn’t like or understand the work. On the other hand, it may lead you back to take another look, to reconsider what you read, saw, or heard.

On those occasions when you are moved by a work, when it makes a strong impression on you, one that is meaningful, you begin to live with that work and let it live in you. You may begin to engage in a dialogue with the work so that it may affect how you think and see, and even live.

To respond fully to any work of art, we have to invest ourselves in it. We have to immerse ourselves in it, give it time to work on us, speak to us, engage our hearts and minds. When this happens, we will have made our study of texts more than a mere academic exercise. We will have made it something that matters in our lives.



Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889, oil on canvas, $28\frac{3}{4} \times 36\frac{1}{2}$ " (73.7×92.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Responding to a Painting: Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night*

Look at the reproduction of Vincent van Gogh's painting *The Starry Night*. Spend a few minutes with the reproduction and write brief answers to the following questions:

1. What was your *first* reaction on seeing this work here? Why do you think you reacted this way?
2. What do you find most striking about the painting? What observations can you make about it?
3. What is your overall impression of the painting? Which of the following best describe your sense of it: calm, peaceful, energetic, frenzied, intense, casual, comfortable, feverish, photographic, visionary? Why do you have the impression you do? Can you think of other adjectives that better suit your impression of the work?
4. If you have access to a color reproduction, how do you react to van Gogh's colors? Consider the colors of the various stars, of the moon, of the sky, of the cypress tree that dominates the left foreground of the picture.

5. How do you react to van Gogh's swirling, sweeping, circular lines? to the thickness of his brush strokes? to the relationship in size and color between the depiction of nature above and town below?
6. How do you respond to van Gogh's departures from reality in the details of the painting. Would you prefer a painting of stars and moon and sky that more closely resembled a photograph? Why or why not?

WRITING EXERCISES

1. Using the previous set of questions, formulate a response to van Gogh's *Starry Night*. Write freely about what you notice, about how you feel, and about what you think. A couple of paragraphs will do.
2. Van Gogh's *Starry Night* has inspired many poems. Here is one by the contemporary American poet, Anne Sexton, on whom van Gogh's painting made a strong impression. Read Sexton's poem a few times, and then jot down a few sentences revealing your response to it.

Responding to Poem: Anne Sexton's "Starry Night"

*That does not keep me from having a terrible
need of—shall I say the word—religion. Then I
go out at night to paint the stars.*

—Vincent van Gogh in a letter to his brother

The town does not exist
except where one black-haired tree slips
up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die.

It moves. They are all alive.
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
to push children, like a god, from its eye.
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die:

into that rushing beast of the night,
sucked up by that great dragon, to split
from my life with no flag,
no belly,
no cry.

Here are a few questions to guide your thinking about Sexton's poem.

1. Look first at the epigraph Sexton includes with her poem. To what extent does van Gogh's comment suggest why he painted the stars? How did the act of painting them affect van Gogh?
2. What does Sexton emphasize in her first stanza? What comparison does she make? What contrast does she identify in the painting? What personal statement does the speaker of the poem make?
3. What seems to be the emphasis of the second stanza? What impression of the sky does this stanza suggest to you? Why?
4. What do you make of the last five lines, which are really a continuation of the second stanza?
5. What does your reading of Sexton's poem add to your experience of van Gogh's painting? Does it alter your perception of it in any way? Do you see things you didn't notice before? Or do you see them another way?
6. Does Sexton's poem affect your response to the painting? Why or why not?

Even though you probably do not see van Gogh's *Starry Night* the way Anne Sexton does or make the same sense of it as she does, by looking at her poem carefully and considering its relationship to van Gogh's painting, you can understand her response. Her view of the painting, what she notices about it, and how she interprets it (the black-haired tree, the hot sky, and the dragon in the sky, for example) may enable us to see things in the painting we had not at first noticed ourselves. This does not mean, however, that we accept Sexton's view of the painting. Nor does it mean that we accept the speaker's apparent death wish.

***The Starry Night* in Context**

You have been looking at one work of art, van Gogh's *Starry Night*, in the context of another: Sexton's poem about van Gogh. Now consider how a self-portrait by the painter, shown opposite, and an excerpt from a letter he wrote to his brother, Theo, shed light on *The Starry Night*.

Here are a few questions to prompt your thinking:

1. What do you notice about the background of the self-portrait? What do you notice about the way van Gogh painted his clothing?
2. How would you describe his face? Consider the eyes, nose, mouth.



Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait, Saint-Rémy*, September 1889, oil on canvas, 25½ × 21½" (65 × 54 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

3. What else do you find noteworthy about the self-portrait?
4. What connections can you make between the two paintings?

Here is the excerpt from van Gogh's letter to his brother, Theo:

For my own part, I declare I know nothing whatever about it; but to look at the stars always makes me dream as simply as I dream over the black dots of a map representing towns and villages. Why, I ask myself, should not the shining dots of the sky not be as accessible as the black dots on the map of France? . . .

I go out at night to paint the stars, and I dream always of a picture like of the house this with a group of living figures. . . .

These colours give me extraordinary exaltation. I have no thought of fatigue. . . . I have a terrible lucidity at moments when nature is so beautiful; I am not conscious of myself any more, and the pictures come to me as in a dream. . . .

Ah! portraiture, portraiture with the thought, the soul of the model in it. That is what I think must come.

WRITING EXERCISE

Write another paragraph or two about *The Starry Night*, incorporating what you learned from either the self-portrait, the letter excerpt, or both.