

**A Handbook on Teaching
Writing in Studio Art Courses
at York College**



The Muse of Automatic Writing

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Introductory Notes

Why write in studio art classes? Art making is often thought of as a process that communicates through non-verbal means. However, from brainstorming concepts to developing an artist statement, writing has become a central component of contemporary art practice. This guide offers strategies for bringing writing processes and assignments into Studio Art Courses at York College. It was designed for instructors teaching Writing Intensive Studio Art courses at and those including writing in non-W.I. Studio Art courses. The guide provides strategies for introducing basic art writing skills, examples of informal, formal, and cumulative writing assignments, and offers further resources.

Art Writing Skills

The Art Writing Skills section covers three skills that are useful to introduce to students early in the semester: key terms for discussing art, visual analysis, and citing sources. Each skill is presented on a handout, which can be printed and distributed to students. The information can also be presented to students on a powerpoint. The handbook also suggests activities for workshopping each skill.

Key Terms for Discussing Art :

Handout: Key Terms for Discussing Art

Sample in-class exercise: Draw a sketch of a still-life. Take 10 minutes to free-write a description of the still-life, using at least 5 formal terms to describe it.

For a more extensive discussion of terms see:

http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/building_lessons/formal_analysis.html

www.oxfordartonline.com/

<http://www.ndoylefineart.com/glossary.html>

Visual Analysis :

Handout: Introduction to Visual Analysis

Sample in-class exercise: Visually analyze an artwork by one of your classmates.

Citing Sources :

Handout: Citing Sources

Sample in-class exercises: Create a bibliographic entry for each of the three provided sources. *[Note: Provide students with three different types of sources for this exercise.]*

Key Terms for Discussing Art Handout :

When understanding the visual information in a work of art, you look at:

Content or Subject Matter: the subject of a work of art

Formal Elements: the visual elements of a work of art

Line: a mark with greater length than width. Lines can be horizontal, vertical, or diagonal; straight or curved; thick or thin.

Shape: a closed line. Shapes can be geometric, like squares and circles; or organic, like free-form or natural shapes. Shapes are flat and can express length and width.

Forms: three-dimensional shapes expressing length, width, and depth. Balls, cylinders, boxes, and pyramids are forms.

Space: the area between and around objects. The space around objects is often called negative space; negative space has shape. Space can also refer to the feeling of depth. Real space is three-dimensional; in visual art, when we create the feeling or illusion of depth, we call it space.

Color: light reflected off of objects. Color has three main characteristics:

Hue (the name of the color, such as red, green, blue, etc.), **value** (how light or dark it is), and **intensity** (how bright or dull it is).

- **Primary colors** are the only true colors (red, blue, and yellow). All other colors are mixes of primary colors.
- **Secondary colors** are two primary colors mixed together (green, orange, violet).
- **Intermediate colors**, sometimes called **tertiary colors**, are made by mixing a primary and secondary color together. Some examples of intermediate colors are yellow green, blue green, and blue violet.
- **Complementary colors** are located directly across from each other on the color wheel (an arrangement of colors along a circular diagram to show how they are related to one another). Complementary pairs contrast because they share no common colors. For example, red and green are complements, because green is made of blue and yellow. When complementary colors are mixed together, they neutralize each other to make brown.

Texture: the surface quality that can be seen and felt. Textures can be rough or smooth, soft or hard.

Context: the historical, political, social, commercial, psychological, or personal circumstances under which a work of art is produced

**The formal element definitions were adapted from The J. Paul Getty Museum's "Elements of Art" guide:
http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/building_lessons/elements_art.pdf

Visual Analysis Handout

The purpose of a **visual analysis** is to recognize and understand the visual choices the artist made in creating the artwork. By observing and writing about separate parts of the art object, you will come to a better understanding of the art object as a whole.

Visual analysis explains how the artist visually conveys ideas, emotions, or concepts. Visual Analysis goes beyond description to interpret the meaning of formal details.

For example:



Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Policeman)*, 2015

Description: The policeman is sitting with one hand on his hip and the other resting on his leg.

Analysis: The policeman's position indicates his power.

Tips for writing visual analysis:

- Give the artist agency by referring to him/her as the subject.
For example: Kerry James Marshall uses several shades of deep blue to convey a sense of mystery and tension.
- Use analytic verbs such as:
 - Reflects
 - Illustrates
 - Demonstrates
 - Shows
 - Highlights
 - Conveys
 - Indicates
 - Reveals
 - Emphasizes

** This definition of “visual analysis” was taken from: https://twp.duke.edu/uploads/assets/visual_analysis.pdf

Citing Sources Handout :

York's Studio Art Department uses Kate L. Turabian's *Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* as its preferred source for citation style. Turabian styles are closely based on those in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, sixteenth edition, with small modifications.

A Quick Guide to Turabian style can be found here:

http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html

Informal Assignment Ideas:

Journals :

Journal writing is a form of informal writing that can help students develop and express ideas, learn and remember technical processes, and connect class content to the outside world. Journals can be shared periodically throughout the semester, or checked at specific checkpoints.

Sketchpad/idea journal: Keep a journal in which you sketch ideas for class projects. Include a brief (3-5 sentences) description of each sketch.

Technical journal: For each new technical skill that you learn in class, write a journal entry. Describe the process, including detailed instructions that you can use when you try the process again. Discuss what you liked about the process and what was difficult about it.

Instagram journal: Using a class hashtag or shared class instagram account, post at least eight photographs or videos of art works or related images that connect to class content. For each post, leave a 2-3 sentence long comment explaining why you chose this image.

[Alternative option: follow this assignment using clippings and sketches in a paper journal.]

In-class visual analysis :

Have students practice visual analysis skills by writing brief (~30 min.) analyses of works connected to class content. Typical visual analyses involve either one artwork or a pair of artworks. Students are often able to write more sophisticated analysis if they are given a prompt question. Give students feedback so that they are able to build their visual analysis skills and repeat this exercise a few times throughout the term so that they are able to continue to exercise these skills.



Example of a prompt for a single work:

Nick Cave, *Soundsuit No. 2*, 2009

How does Nick Cave convey a sense of movement and play in this soundsuit?

Example of a prompt for a comparison:



Nick Cave, *Soundsuit No. 2*, 2009



Ivy Billiot, "Bear," 1999

How do these two sculptors differ in their approaches to depicting movement?

Critique Notes :

Critiques in art classes typically happen as verbal dialogues, but students often are able to offer more developed feedback if they take a few minutes to write down their ideas first.

Before beginning a class critique, ask each student to take 5 minutes to write down their comments and questions about each work. These can be collected for an in-class participation grade, handed to the artists as additional feedback, or can remain within the writers' possession.

After the critique, ask each student to take 10 minutes to reflect on the criticism that they were given. What did they learn about how others see their work? What would they do to change their work?

Artist Influences Blog :

Each students must blog about three artists whose work they are influenced by over the course of the semester on a collective class blog. Blog posts should include the following:

- 2-3 images of the artist's work
- Explain why you chose this artist in 2-3 sentences. What do you like about their approach?
- Describe their artistic process in 2-3 sentences
- Include one link to an article about the artist in a valid arts news source. (Choose from list provided by the teacher.)

Wall labels :

Look at and discuss example wall labels before beginning this practice in class. Have students write a wall label for their work on an index card. The label should include: brief descriptions of content, references, and 2-3 sentences of visual analysis.

For an overview on the process of writing wall labels and for examples see:

<http://www.slideshare.net/stephaniepau/writing-effective-interpretive-labels-for-art-exhibitions-a-nuts-and-bolts-primer>

Formal Assignment Ideas:

Exhibition Review :

This assignment builds analytic skills through the development of an exhibition review. Like the artist statement, this assignment should be scaffolded so that students are introduced to the process of writing an exhibition review before they go on to write their own.

Reading assignment: Sylvan Barnett provides a useful introduction to writing an exhibition review in “Chapter 5: Writing a Review of an Exhibition,” in *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, 8th edition. Read this and come to class prepared to discuss how the three reviews of Mark Rothko differ.

Reading contemporary exhibition reviews activity: Read three exhibition reviews from different publications and write an informal analysis comparing them. Who are these reviews written for? What format do they take? What voice do they use? How do the authors build an argument of the exhibition? *[Note: I recommend assigning students three reviews so that they can have a shared basis for discussion.]*

Discuss responses in class. As a class, vote on which of the three publications you will target your reviews towards. *[This will help to streamline the review-writing process.]*

Create a rubric: Work in groups to create a rubric for grading their exhibition review assignments. A blank rubric can be found here:

http://www.teachersprintables.net/preview/Blank_Rubric

[Students can vote as a class on the rubric they most want to use, norm the rubrics, or the teacher can create a rubric out of the students ideas. It is key that they students see this rubric before they turn in their exhibition review drafts.]

Select exhibitions: Select an exhibition from a provided list that connects to class content. Each student must select a different exhibition.

Visit the exhibition: Take notes, draw sketches.

First draft: Peer review: Bring first draft to class. Exchange drafts. Grade using the rubric that you developed as a class. Return to writer.

Second draft: Final Draft. *[Or do another round of peer reviews. Once the teacher receives the final draft s/he should grade using the student-generated rubric.]*

Artist Statement

An artist statement should help potential buyers, critics, or employers to understand what you believe to be the most important aspects of your art and the techniques you use to make it. The statement should summarize these things in as few words as possible, preferably short ones, and not be a lengthy dissertation on your place in the future history of art. An artist statement can focus on a single work, series or works, or your entire oeuvre.

Artists' statements, depending on their intended audience, vary in length, form, and substance. The following are some of the elements to take into account:

- Your audience
- Your purpose or concept
- The materials and medium in which you work
- The subject of your work
- The artists, theories, and methodologies that influenced your work
- Your own personal perspective or background

Writing an artist statement can be a daunting task. This assignment is best done in scaffolded chunks. In preparing to write an artist statement it is useful to devote some time to look at examples. Statements can be found on artists' websites, exhibition catalogues, and other art sources.

Reading artists statements activity:

At home: Read a selection of artist statements. Annotate them with comments and questions. Make a list of guidelines for writing your own statement.

In class: Work in groups to “norm” your guidelines. Come together as a class to determine a collective list. Write on large paper or board and hang on the wall.

Questions free-writing activity: Now that you have looked at a range of statements and developed a set of guidelines, do some do some free-writing to start to think about the information that you want to include in your own statement. Here are some questions that can guide this process.

- Why do you like to make art?
- What subjects do you prefer? Why?
- What processes and techniques do you use? Why?
- How is your work different from others?
- What do you see in your artwork?
- What do other people say they see?
- What are your goals and aspirations as an artist?
- Who or what inspires you?

Drafts: Artists statements typically go through many drafts and are given to several different readers before they are made public.

First Draft: Class critique: Bring printed copies of your completed first draft to class. For homework, each participant must read and comment on eachothers’ drafts. *[Note: Depending on class size, students can break into smaller critique groups.]* Check each draft that you read against the guidelines that the class agreed upon. Make sure to point out areas where the writer is unclear and to ask questions at points that you want more information.

Second Draft: Outside critique: Revise based on your classmates feedback. Give your second draft to two people who don’t know very much about art. Ask them to do the following:

- Circle terms that you are unfamiliar with.
- Underline phrases or sentences that you don’t understand.
- Write three clarifying questions for the author.

Third Draft: Teacher critique: Revise based on your outside readers’ feedback. Bring a third draft to your teacher.

Fourth Draft: Final Statement.

**Aspects of this assignment were adapted from <http://www.columbiasc.edu/wid/academic-areas/writing-for-visual-arts/writing-an-artists-statement> and <http://www.nitaleland.com/articles/statement.htm>.

Cumulative Assignment Example:

[Many of the aforementioned assignments can be combined to create a scaffolded writing process that unfolds throughout a semester. This is one example, based on a 14-week course.]

Introductory writing: [weeks 1-3]

- Students practice writing wall labels for works selected by the teacher. These labels include: brief descriptions of content, references, and 2-3 sentences of visual analysis.

Ongoing informal writing:

- Students keep a technical journal throughout the semester.
- Students create a sketch with a brief formal analysis of the sketch for each assignment.
- Upon completion of each assignment, students write a brief wall label, describing the content and references for their work, and analyzing it using 2-3 sentences.
- Students contribute 3-5 artist references to a collective course blog.

Final project proposal: [Due week 11]

In a 1-2 page proposal, outline the following:

- Describe the content that your final project will deal with. Provide a rationale for why you have selected that content.
- Describe the technique that you will use in the work. Drawing upon your technical journal, explain why you have chosen the technique to express your chosen content.
- Name 2-3 artists references that you will draw upon and briefly explain why you have selected these artists. (These can be references that anyone contributed to the blog.)
- Include a sketch with 3-5 sentences of visual analysis.

Revised proposal: [Due week 12] Revise based on feedback from instructor. *[Potential to include peer review here, as well.]*

Final Project Extended Wall Label Assignment:

In 2-3 pages, create an extended wall label for your project, based on the information that you included in your proposal. The extended wall label should include:

- Discussion of content.
- Visual analysis of the final project
- Analysis of how the final project draws upon artist references.
- Discussion of technique.

Develop rubric for Final Project Extended Wall Label: [week 12] In class groups.

Final Extended Wall Label Drafts: [Due week 13] Revised after peer and teacher feedback.

Final Extended Wall Label: [Due week 14] Displayed with work in end of term exhibition.

Resources:

Further resources for writing about art :

Art History Teaching Resources <http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/>

Barnet, Sylvan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, 8th Edition (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008).

Columbia College's Guide to "Writing For Visual Arts"
<http://www.columbiasc.edu/wid/academic-areas/writing-for-visual-arts>

Haust, Bill, "Writing Experiences Across the Art Department Curriculum," *Writing Across the Curriculum*, Vol. 9, August 1998.

Hudson, Suzanne and Nancy Noonan-Morrissey, *The Art of Writing about Art* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Learning, 2002).

Sayre, Henry M. *Writing about Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005).

Tucker, Amy, *Visual Literacy: Writing about Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001).

Contemporary art writing sources :

Art 21 Magazine: <http://blog.art21.org/>

Art F City: <http://artfcity.com/>

Artforum: <http://artforum.com/>

Art in America: <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/>

Bad at Sports: <http://badatsports.com/>

Bidoun: <http://bidoun.org/>

Big Red & Shiny: <http://bigredandshiny.org/>

Hyperallergic: <http://hyperallergic.com/>

NYT: <http://www.nytimes.com/section/arts/design>

Village Voice: <http://www.villagevoice.com/arts>