

Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art

Below is a brief guide to help students and teachers analyze art. Once students learn to analyze, they can compare and contrast different works as well as place them in historical context.

1. **Description** involves two steps where you describe in detail what you see. You must be objective. Describe in detail only what you see. Don't try to explain or interpret.

A. **Facts** Size / Medium / Date / Artist / Title / Subject Matter

B. **Basic Elements of Design** These features enable us to describe how works of art look.

Line In two-dimensional art, a continuous mark made on a surface by a moving point. Line can define space or create patterns. Three-dimensional art can also have linear qualities.

Color has hue or tint (red, yellow, etc.), intensity (brightness or dullness), and value (light or dark).

Value The lightness or darkness of a color.

Texture Surface qualities that can actually be felt (smooth, rough, soft, hard) or simulated in two-dimensional works.

Space The distance or area between, around, above, below, or within things. It can be two-dimensional, three-dimensional, and described in various ways (flat, shallow, deep, etc.).

Shape Two-dimensional enclosed space defined by elements such as line, color, value, and texture.

Form A general term for things occupying space. Form encloses volume and, in contrast to shape, is three-dimensional.

2. **Analysis** You are still collecting facts. How have the following artistic principles been used to organize the elements?

Balance (or imbalance) The arrangement of parts in a design or composition working to create feelings of stability or instability.

Unity The combining of parts into a complete whole. Does a work give the impression that nothing can be changed without changing its total character?

Emphasis Anything that singles out certain features of a work over others. Emphasized elements are often used to focus attention.

Contrast A difference between two things—light and shadow, two different colors, two different shapes, etc.

Pattern Repetition of things such as shapes, lines, or colors.

Movement Arranging lines, shapes, forms, or textures so they cause the eye to move or give the observer a sense of movement.

Rhythm Regular repetition of artistic elements to produce the look and feel of movement.

3. Interpretation Here you make intelligent assumptions about the meaning or mood of the work: What is the artist trying to communicate to me?

These assumptions must be supported by what you see. Use what you learned from steps **(1)** and **(2)** to help you support your decision. You may discuss how the artwork makes you feel but remember that your feelings have to be backed up by what you observe.

4. Judgment “Is this a successful work of art?” This is both subjective and objective. Subjectively, you may evaluate whether or not the artwork fulfills your personal criteria: Would you want to live with this piece? Objectively, you must evaluate the work so that others understand your subjective evaluation.

Definitions in (1B) and (2) cited and/or adapted from the
ArtCyclopedia Glossary of Fine Art Terms
<http://www.artcyclopedia.com/scripts/glossary-art-a.html>