

Introduction to Formal Analysis Reference Sheet

“...[A] formal analysis – the result of looking closely – is an analysis of the form that the artist produces; that is, an analysis of the work of art, which is made up of such things as line, shape, color, texture, mass, composition. These things give the stone or canvas its form, its expression, its content, its meaning. – Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*¹

Formal analysis, also known as **visual analysis**, is one of the most essential tools for an art historian. It involves looking at a work of art and identifying the visual qualities which compose it. It involves little to no prior knowledge of an artist or their work, and requires no research by the art historian. It can be applied to any of the visual arts, which include painting, sculpture, architecture, drawing, photography, ceramics, and crafts such as weaving or knitting.



(Left) Rudolf Dührkoop, *Portrait of Heinrich Wölfflin*, 1920's. Image in Public Domain.
(Right) Roger Fry, *Self Portrait*, 1928. Image in Public Domain.

This technique can be traced back to two important figures in art history: Heinrich Wölfflin and Roger Fry. **Heinrich Wölfflin** (1864-1945) was a Swiss art historian who is remembered for the role he played in the development of formal analysis. Wölfflin developed a way of closely analyzing the formal qualities of a particular artist's work, such as the way they drew an earlobe or hand, to identify their personal style. **Roger Fry** (1866-1934) was an English painter and art critic, who also emphasized the importance of the visual qualities of an artwork. Fry is famous for developing Formalism, a movement which focused only on the formal, or visual, aspects of a work of art. He became very influential in how we write about formal analysis.

¹ Barnet, Sylvan. *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*. 11th ed. New York, NY: Pearson, 2014.

Formal Qualities and Words to Describe Them

The following are certain qualities to look for while performing a formal analysis. A definition is provided for each, as well as examples of descriptive words associated with the visual quality. The list of descriptive words does not include all of the possible word choices, but a small amount of commonly used ones.

Medium

The medium is the type of materials the artist used to create a work of art. Each medium has its own strengths and weaknesses. For example, paintings have the ability to show many things at once, but they are flat. Sculptures are three-dimensional, but are not able to show everything a painting can.

Possible descriptions: Oil paint; Watercolor; Marble; Bronze; Photography; Red Brick; Stainless Steel; Glass; Charcoal; Porcelain; Yarn; this list is endless.

Content/Subject

What is the artist presenting to us in the artwork? This can be clear or unclear, depending on the artwork. If it is unclear, think about the other visual qualities to see if they help you decipher what the subject is.

Possible descriptions: A young woman in a city; A woman at a kitchen table, inside her home; A woman in a dress; Men working in the field; A rich couple in the countryside; this list is endless.

Composition

Composition is the arrangement of elements within a work of art. Think about where objects are placed, if there is a clear foreground/background in a painting, what is the focal point that draws your eye? The composition of an artwork can make a piece feel calm, or frenzied; balanced or asymmetrical; static or energetic.

Possible descriptions: Balanced/Unbalanced; Uniform/Varied; Flatness/Depth; Triangular; Rectangular; Circular.

Color

Color can be a very strong choice for an artist. However, not all mediums can include colors to the extent that others can. Bronze or marble sculpture, for example, are usually one color. Paintings, on the other hand, can be monochromatic (one color) or polychromatic (many colors).

Possible descriptions: Monochromatic; Polychromatic; Grayscale (black and white); Vibrant/Bright; Muted/Dull; Metallic; Saturated; Light; Dark; Contrasting; Opaque; Translucent

Line

Lines show a path in the artwork. They are often found surrounding objects. When looking at a work of art, think about the path your eyes take.

Possible descriptions: Vertical; Horizontal; Diagonal; Thick; Thin; Straight; Curved; Long; Short

Shape & Form

Shapes are flat, or two-dimensional, and have height and length. Form describes objects that have three-dimensionality, meaning they have height, length, and width. When looking at shapes and forms, think about if they appear flat, or if they have depth, or are rounded.

Possible descriptions: Flat; Rounded; Angular; Geometric; Organic; Sharp; Soft

Texture

Texture is the physical quality of a material. Every object has a texture - even if it appears flat and even, its texture would be called smooth. Artists can paint an object to make it look like it has texture. They can also create texture with different brushstrokes, or different mediums.

Possible descriptions: Smooth; Rugged; Soft; Hard; Rough; Rich; Thick (such as paint); Hairy; Sharp; Silky;