

Writing a Visual Analysis

Don't have an art background? Don't worry. You probably know a lot more than you realize. Modern people are surrounded by images every day. Even if you don't know the terms of how people analyze art, you will be familiar with many of the tricks that artists use to create a reaction in the reader, such as making the most important images larger and light, and the less important ones in the background or fading darker. You can also easily recognize symbolic colors, such as: red means emergency or blood or danger; green means safe and close to nature; and blue means cool and relaxed.

Most visual analysis papers will require a clear and vivid description of the image along with an analysis of the visual composition of the picture in order to explain how the artist put the image together to create meaning. Although visual analysis essays often focus a lot on the details of describing the image, you will also need a thesis which tells what the images mean. There are several ways to do this and your assignment may tell you in which direction to go. Here are some typical ways to analyze images for meaning:

- Analyze the meaning of the image for the artist and his or her time
- Analyze the meaning of the image for you and your time
- Analyze the changes in meaning of an image over the course of time
- Analyze the audience's reaction to the image
- Analyze your own reaction and evaluate the effectiveness of the image

Using the Visual Elements of Design chart will help you to describe the visual elements of the picture and analyze how each element helps to create meaning.

Visual Elements of Design

Element	Definition	Key Questions	Why important
Composition	How the image is put together. Where things are placed in relationship to one another and to the space of the canvas.	What is main figure? How are other figures placed in relation to main figure? What is left out?	The way different parts of an image are put together draws the viewer's attention to some parts more than others. It also creates tone, mood and meaning.
Elements of Design	The different aspects the artist can use to put together the image.	Which elements of design are most important in this piece (color, line, texture, shape, form, value, size, text, movement)?	Meaning comes from what the artist uses and also what he or she doesn't use.
Focal Point	Where your attention is drawn to in the picture	What is the focal point? What elements of design does the artist use to create the focal point?	Understanding the focal point helps you understand the meaning of the picture.
Color	All of the colors as well as black, white and neutrals. Monochromatic means using one color. Complementary means using colors opposite one another on the color wheel.	What colors are used? How do these colors affect the tone, mood and meaning of the image? Are colors used in predictable or unpredictable ways? (example: predictable is red for danger)	Color can create meaning by creating moods, highlighting particular parts of the image, connecting aspects of the image, or by being symbolic.
Line	Actual lines in picture or lines created by the placement of other objects.	How do lines draw your attention towards or away from certain parts of the picture?	Artists use lines to draw your attention to the focal point.
Texture	Texture is how rough or smooth something is, or the pattern it has. Texture can be real on three dimensional art, or represented on two dimensional art.	Where is texture in the image and how does this texture create an expectation in the audience of a particular touch sensation?	Texture links images to real objects and the use of senses other than sight.

Shape	The way in which the artist uses circles, squares, rectangles, ovals and other shapes in the art.	How are shapes used in the art? Where does shape, or relationships between shapes help your eye to focus?	Our eyes tend to focus on familiar shapes and see shapes in two dimensional art.
Form	How light and shading techniques make a two dimensional object look like it has three dimensions.	Where has the artist used shading or light to highlight some aspect of the image? Does some part of the image stand out as having three dimensions?	Form can contribute to making an image seem more real, and also to add importance to a part of the picture through shading and use of light.
Value	Degree of light and dark in different parts of the picture.	How are light and dark used in this picture? Is there a symbolic use of light and dark? Does the artist use light or dark to highlight the focal point?	Value can be used along with color. Extreme changes in value create contrast which is often used to provide meaning.
Size	Size can refer to the overall size of the image and also the relative size of items in the image.	Why did the artist choose this size for the piece? What is the meaning of the difference between sizes of elements in the image?	Variation in the size of shapes and lines indicates relative significance.
Symbolic Elements	Specific parts of the design which have symbolic or historical meaning (such as a cross for Christianity, or triangles for the Trinity).	Are any of the aspects of this piece symbolic? Does the artist intend to use the symbolism directly or to invert it?	Symbols draw on cultural meanings which can work differently for different audiences.