WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES SERIES

Art History

General Information:

Much like writing, art is a way of expressing our inner worlds in a way that responds to and even engages the world around us. You may find it challenging or even intimidating to use one system of expression to describe another, especially when they differ so much in their aesthetics – alternatively, a professor or tutor may be reluctant to help you write about art for fear of hampering your own creativity in expressing your interpretation of an artwork. You will most often be asked to write about a work of art and your experience of it in an Art History course. Here we will give you some basic direction, plus some things to think about, when writing a paper for your Art History course as if you yourself were an Art History major.

Types of art: Before you can begin writing, you need to be aware of what kind of art you will be faced with trying to discuss. There are several types of art you will encounter, namely: drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, video art, and architecture.

Types of papers: Of course, you may be tasked with an assignment other than describing the formal parts (e.g., symmetry, perspective, etc.) of a singular work of art, referred to as a formal analysis. Sometimes you may have to compare and contrast two different pieces of art; or describe the historical context in which a work was conceived, a sociological essay. There is also the biographical essay where you detail an artist’s life, perhaps as it pertains to a certain work or body of works. Additionally, you can explore an artwork’s symbolism through an iconography or use other writings about a work to interpret its themes, known as iconology.

Writing Your Paper

Things to Consider:

• Format and Citations: your paper should follow either MLA or Chicago documentation styles, per your professors instructions in the prompt they give you.

• Title: your paper’s title should be interesting and convey the overarching theme of your essay.

• Thesis statement: your thesis should succinctly state your understanding of a work in a way that allows your audience to clearly see the judgements your paper will make.

• Topic sentences at the end of paragraphs: contrary to what you may have been taught previously, in Art History papers your topic sentence should come at the end of the paragraph. Writing this way allows you to build towards your arguments and observations.

• Avoid using subjectives like “I”: when analyzing a work, express your interpretation to your audience without presenting it as your personal opinion; your interpretations should be derived from formal aspects of the work, not your opinions of the work independent of your experience of it.

• Questions to get you writing: what is the title? why was it made? what is its purpose? what is the medium? what is the relationship between the parts of the work? is there any symbolism? what is the size?
Tips for Consultants

When working with students on papers in the Art History discipline keep the following in mind:

• **Citation**: papers will typically be in either MLA or Chicago format (should be specified on prompt given by professor).
• **Use of sources**: both primary (the work itself) and secondary (reviews of the work found in books and scholarly journals).
• **Format**: keep the student mindful of what type of paper they are writing to describe a work or artist (found on previous page, ‘types of papers’).
• **Context**: Perhaps this is the most important thing to be mindful of. Understand, and help the student understand, that context is very important when writing in the Art History discipline: the historical and cultural contexts that affected the artist in their creation of a work and the social and personal contexts in which the work is experienced. It is of the upmost importance that the student understand how these contexts can affect how they perceive, experience, and express their attitudes of a work, and how society responds to not only the work but also their personal beliefs about a work.

References

