Writing About Art

“An essay on art is an attempt to help your reader to see the work as you see it.”

(Barnet*)

This handout will help you to better understand what people say, and the ways they say it effectively, when writing about art. To start, it is important to know that, in defending your thesis statement, the qualities and features of the work of art are used as evidence. Second, writing about art includes a range of kinds of writing, including description, interpretation, analysis or explanation, personal report, and evaluation. Most assignments call for a combination of these approaches.

If the assignment asks you to describe the work, keep in mind:

• Prolonged description can be boring, especially if you include a reproduction of the work of art in your essay.
• Readers welcome description that calls attention to what is not evident in a reproduction (texture, the view from a different angle, etc.).

If the assignment asks you to interpret the work, keep in mind:

• An interpretation sees the work of art as representing something, or expressing something, or doing something.
• A work of art can have several meanings – the meaning it 1) had for the artist; 2) had for its first audience; 3) had for later audiences; 4) has for us today.
• Artists themselves sometimes offer interpretations of their works, but if you have not read it directly from the artist, be careful when attributing intention to him or her.

If the assignment asks you to analyze or explain the work, keep in mind:

• The reader may need to know how the artist gets the effect you are describing.
• An analysis requires looking closely at the form of the work, which is made up of such features as line, shape, color, texture, mass, and composition.

If the assignment asks you to include a personal report or evaluation, keep in mind:

• It is okay to use “I,” but use it sparingly. Rather than always revealing your feelings about the work by saying “I feel” and “this moves me,” sometimes it is better to point to evidence by calling attention to qualities in the work that cause you to feel this way. Instead of: “My first feeling upon looking at the painting is one of violence and unrest...”, assert: “The first impression made by the painting is one of violence and unrest...”