

THE FORMAL ART CRITIQUE: Verbalizing the Art Experience

One way to structure an art critique, no matter the medium, is to discuss the work through a four step process: Description, Analysis, Interpretation, and Evaluation. Organized as such, a critique resembles the scientific method of investigation: begin with observable facts and build to an evaluative conclusion. Knowledge of the elements of art and principles of design are critical in the process, as they provide a common vocabulary with which to intelligently and accurately discuss art. Some points to consider throughout the formal analysis: to encourage well-thought responses, ensure ample time for brainstorming before the dialogue begins. Remember that art is subjective, and personal tastes and prejudices will inform criticism. People may disagree, but challenge participants to defend their positions by tracing the logic that led to their assessment.

1. DESCRIPTION: Objectively observe the elements of art.

- What does the credit line (artist, medium, date) tell you?
- Name some other major events in history that occurred the same time this work was created.
- What do you notice first when you look at the work? List the literal objects in the painting.
- What kinds of lines do you see? Are they thin, thick, jagged, soft, a certain color?
- What shapes can we see? What kind of edges do the shapes have?
- What colors do you see? How do they transition into one another?
- What sort of textures do you see? Are they implied or actual?
- What is the environment? How can you tell?

2. ANALYSIS: Discuss the art principles utilized in the work.

- How is line/shape/color/texture/light used? Do any of these dominate; or play a different roll?
- Is a recognizable scene presented, or are art elements used in an abstracted way?
- What is the focal point of this work?
- How has the overall visual effect or mood been achieved?

3. INTERPRETATION: Express opinions about the work's meaning.

- Does the title fit the piece? How would you have titled it?
- What was the artist's statement? What do you think it means? How does it relate to your life?
- What feelings does the artwork conjure?
- Do you think there are images in the artwork that are symbols for other things?
- Why do you think that the artist chose to work in this medium/style? How does it fit the idea?

4. EVALUATION: After careful observation, analysis, and interpretation, the viewer is ready to make judgments.

- Do you think this work has intrinsic value? (Is it beautiful, does it convey an important social message, affect a worldview, make insightful connections, reaffirm a religious belief?)
- Does the work communicate an idea, feeling, or principle that would have value for others?
- Does the work lack value? Why? Could the reason you find the work lacking come from a poor use of the elements of art? Lack of personal expression? Could the subject matter be unappealing, unimaginative, or repulsive? Explore criticism as much as praise.
- Rather than seeing the work as being very effective or without total value, does the work fall somewhere in-between? If you could give this piece a grade, what would it be?
- What do you think is worth remembering about the piece?

Sources:

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