

# How to Do Things with Pictures

A Guide to Writing in Art History



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# Plan of the Book

This book is intended as an introduction to writing about art. But many of the challenges encountered in first writing about art never go away, no matter how much practice we get. For this reason, the book might also be of interest to experienced writers.

The basic trouble with writing about art, or even thinking about art for that matter, is that we have to employ words to describe, explain, evoke, or otherwise circumnavigate sensory experience: visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory and even, god forbid, olfactory. This is a problem in part because the senses are still somewhat embarrassing to us as intellectual beings (art writing is unintentionally personal), and in part because, though we talk about things we see and hear every day, we so seldom consider *how* we see things or the manner in which sound or feelings propagate in us. In short, we are forced to remember and also to articulate processes which usually remain vague. The results are often intriguing, even pleasurable. But the learning curve can be off-putting.

With this difficulty in mind, I have organized the book around two themes, looking and writing, with an intermezzo on the definition of art, and some addenda. The treatment of the first theme, looking, is meant to activate what many people consider a passive operation. As such, purposeful looking includes much thinking, note-taking, and scholarly research—looking through books. The end result of this persistent gaze at the art object is that the writer should never be in the position of having to approach the blank piece of paper (blank screen) with *nothing to say*. Writing, the second theme, represents the consolidation and communication of the viewer's knowledge and thinking. The first four chapters are preparatory in nature and only the last (chapter 10) deals with formal essay writing. The rationale for this arrangement is that scholarly writing is not simple, but that its complexity and practical value stem from a systematic, patient approach to organizing and presenting evidence, not from any rigid rules of content.

All in all, the modest goal of this book is to make academic art writing painless and intellectually rewarding for the writer. Whether the end result of a subjectively happier writing experience will be a better essay remains to be seen—but it is a reasonable expectation. If this happens, we might also get happier teachers.

Though not intended specifically as an introduction to writing art history, this book is written from the perspective of an art historian. This is in part a limitation of the author; readers might find a philosopher's or a poet's take more enlightening. Art history indeed is a relatively young discipline. But it has stumbled across more of the obstacles encountered in thinking about art than just about any other academic discipline. Some of the obstacles will resurface here, with appropriate signposts.

How-to books often suffer from too stuffy or too familiar a style, regaling the reader with what “one,” or “you,” should do. Analogously, they often flit between advice that is too general and a schoolmasterly dogmatism. While this book runs into both faults, I have tried to address the second by giving very specific advice that the reader is free not to follow, according to her own taste and intellectual preferences.

The basic trouble with writing about art, or even thinking about art for that matter, is that we have to employ words to describe, explain, evoke, or otherwise circumnavigate sensory experience.



Fig.1 Mary Cassatt, *The Bath*, 1890-1891, drypoint, softground etching, and aquatint.



# Part One: Looking

## Why Write?

Before we can begin a discussion of *how* to write about art, the crucial question is *why*? There is a reductive answer to this: “because it’s assigned,” or “because it might as well be.” Not only is this answer banal, but it is unhelpful because it cannot inspire us to generate prose. The harried student facing an impending and arbitrary assignment should imagine himself in the place of a harried staff writer on a newspaper. “Why am I writing about art?” implies not only the question “what am I writing about?”, but “what is new and interesting about what I am writing?” and “to whom is it new and interesting?”

“Alright,” replies the harried student, “the paper is not due for another week. What is the philosophical purpose of writing about art?” Again, the question should be made more specific: “what is *my* purpose?” Even this may be to some degree handed down by the professor (cigar-puffing editor) in the form of a prompt. Still, there is no way writing will take place until the task is personalized to the point where one’s own intellect takes over. We’ll return to the problem of the assignments later, since that is a problem of interpretation. Let us assume for the moment a writer free to write anything about any artwork (for simplicity we start with one piece). Say you’ve chosen *The Bath*, a late nineteenth-century print by Mary Cassatt (Fig.1). Examine the work for a moment, allowing its rich, overwhelming peculiarity to sink in. Stare at some detail until you’ve lost track of the big picture. Pause and glance out the window.

Now return to those starting questions: what to write about, and for whom? The subject seems to be stare one in the face. Yet in the compactness of even a deceptively simple print there are a thousand thematic threads one can unravel. Shall I write about the artist’s handling, the way she simulates the informality of an afternoon bath? Should I wax lyrical on the mother-child bond? Or might I explore an ambivalence suggested by the physical distance between woman and child, and the latter’s puppet-like motion?

One should daydream subjects in this way, staying alert for an idea that is particularly just (“it fits”) or that excites one’s curiosity or store of acquired knowledge (“I *know this well*”). But how to decide, finally, what to write about? Is this an irrational matter? Yes and no. Even on a deadline, *what* one actually writes always emerges from odd, unexamined impulses. You don’t have time to analyze yourself. Yet one can gain some control over this whimsical process—even force ideas when the imagination is unwilling—simply to juxtaposing the question “what to write about?” with the corollaries we’ve already discussed, particularly “who am I writing for?” and the selfish “what am I interested in?” This latter question must be interpreted broadly: one can write well about the familiar, but sheer excitement of discovery can carry one into unknown waters, and produce a better text to boot. As for “who am I writing for?” this is the perennial question for writers, the question of the audience. Student writers tend to be cynical about this, citing an “audience of one,” their instructor. This should rather encourage them! Where the professional writer struggles with a nebulous public of widely varying skills and interests, the student has one attentive, well-informed reader.

# part one

The question then is: what can I *tell* my reader? An unambitious writer tells the reader what she already knows. This is flattering, and if the reader is undemanding, the writer will get away with it.

A better writer will try to leverage what the reader already knows, establishing a connection with something she doesn't know—or doesn't know that she knows. What do you know that no-one else knows? With pictures this question is hardly daunting, since every inexperienced writer can discover something radically new through simply *looking* (or hearing, touch, etc., if the art object is not primarily visual). Writing about this sensory encounter is neither an outdated ritual from the pre-jpeg era, nor an end in itself. It not only establishes the writer's grasp of the object, but digests that object into intelligible ideas about the world that she shares with the reader. Whether the reader has his own prior experiences of the art object or not, after reading, she should possess an experience of the writer's encounter with that object.

Let us return to *The Bath*. As with most visual objects, we can crudely distinguish two distinct but overlapping aspects of the work, its physical substance (the paper, ink, draftsmanship, arrangement of colored shapes; what is sensible in the image) and its conceptual content (the narrative situation, its emotional and intellectual implications, its cultural presuppositions). One cannot always make this separation neatly (for instance, see Fig.2), but here it allows us to discern two broadly opposed approaches to art writing that will probably never be entirely reconciled. On the one hand, we're dealing with a *formalist* approach, which delves into the mechanics of visual or other sensory representation to address the way the image works, excluding as extrinsic circumstances outside the work, from the biography to the culture of the maker. On the other hand we have a *contextual* approach, which reads through the images social or cultural processes that played a role in the artist's milieu, and often continue to do so in the present. These two types of art writing are often combined by intelligent writers, but not without difficulties, because they tend to produce divergent results. The formal argument tends to insist on the uniqueness of the art object, on its specificity. The contextual argument on the contrary sees the same kind of forces informing the art and thought of a period, its visual objects and its social life.

It is not difficult, even without practice, to produce insights of the two types about *The Bath*. The assured sketchiness of the drypoint technique; the anatomical truthfulness, to the point of awkwardness, of the bodies, the cool, flattening harmony of blue and yellow regions—all these point to formal qualities that belong uniquely to this image. As a writer, the formalist celebrates this specificity, or perhaps recounts it in a tone of cool objectivity. Yet are these particularities ultimately as significant as the body of social convention that envelops the image like a fuzzy blanket? The casual, almost compulsory bond between mother and child, dramatized by the artist, is a central tenet of modern European ideologies of the nuclear family. The contextualist may expose this collaboration between art and society in a critical tone. Or she might draw attention to the subjective primacy of the viewer, who is given an imaginative opportunity to interpret the relationship between the two figures. The writer may find this particular coincidence between art and culture liberating, or confining.

Are formal and contextual insights incompatible? Are they as incompatible as, say, a positive and a negative reading? Probably not. A nuanced view of the past is one that is aware both of how it resembles and how it differs from the present. Likewise, art objects both resemble and differ from the artists and the societies that produced them—and from each other. In Cassatt's case, one could argue that the combination of a Victorian

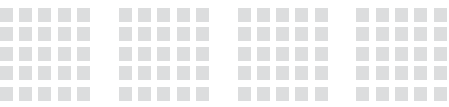


sentimental subject with an unfamiliar perspective (reminiscent of Japanese prints) and color scheme serves to de-familiarize motherhood, to render it a strange and imaginatively charged activity. This is only a hunch, and we want to test it thoroughly: for instance, by asking whether our argument still makes sense if the woman administering the bath is *not* the mother, but a governess or wet-nurse. But insofar as we have found both something strange and something generic about the image, we have the historical traction needed to turn our hunch into a well-arguable thesis.

Having examined two divergent strategies of art writing, and a proto-thesis that combines the two, we can suggest how art historians reach their argumentative goals. Art writing does not propose to establish universal principles. A thesis in art history is contingent on the objects it is applied to: truth depends on fit. This is because art itself is a slippery mixture of culture and physical nature. What one can do in a successful piece of art prose is to *suggest strongly*. A strongly suggestive idea is far from useless: its value is proven over time, as other writers and readers rely upon it to make sense of this art object, and perhaps others. Ideas in art history, then, are only as good as the objects they are applied to. That is, they are right insofar as they explain visible things.

In the case of the Cassatt print, one has the fortune of a generously sensual object to tackle. But what if the art remains mute, if it simply refuses to volunteer a narrative content? One can still find a story to tell, by reflection on the sort of text one wishes to write. For although good art writing gives some account of sensory matter, it cannot stop there. Art objects, for all their power of immediacy, are made by specific individuals working in distinct places and times. Thus any full account of them must to some degree be historical. Depending on the writer, the text may reach down into philosophical conclusions, or press ahead with social scientific, political, even moral considerations. Though it is unfashionable at the moment, one may even insist on the aesthetic force of an object divorced from any notion of utility. These are not end results, but only starting frames of mind. But finding a compelling object comes first.

Ideas in art history, then, are only as good as the objects they are applied to. That is, they are right insofar as they explain visible things.



## Finding the Object

This section was once called “Encountering the Object” until I realized that the real difficulty lies in *finding* the object. As a teacher, I’ve seen many a decent paper that might have been great had the student found a subject that truly excited her. This unfortunately is also true of many books written by professionals. For this reason, the time spent strolling around museum or flipping through exhibition catalogues prior to writing is time well spent. Here, prior knowledge can often be misleading. As a student, I myself have been stuck writing on hopeless subjects simply out of a complacent belief that I liked the artist in question. Artists, like all creative people, are inconsistent. Make sure you know the work itself before making up your mind to work on it.

Is it important to like what you write about? Yes, because without sympathy, you will be missing the curiosity that is a crucial ingredient to good thinking. What if one has been assigned an antipathetic artwork? Then the writer should at least try to work up genuine indignation against the piece: for this will equip one with some of the same resourcefulness as enjoying the work. The only warning about writing from a deeply critical standpoint is that one should beware of being closed-minded on the subject. One should rather maintain the aplomb of a detective who is willing to discover exonerating evidence—and not suppress it.

Let us call this metaphorical stand-in for the writer Sherlock Holmes. Holmes is observant, sharp, and methodical. But that isn’t enough. If you’ve read Arthur Conan Doyle you know that the stories wouldn’t be interesting without Watson, the excitable companion of Holmes who asks all the naïve questions. The writer’s psyche should likewise make room for this asker of questions. One must be curious, willing to be shocked, and indeed to allow oneself to be drawn to precisely that which is shocking and vital. This will generate the problems for the Sherlock Holmes mentality to solve.

So, we are going to go to the museum looking for a mystery. Which museum? Whichever art museum is closest to one, or collects objects of particular personal interest. Locations and schedules can be discovered online. No museum handy? A search of one’s library or of the website of a reputable institution (the Louvre in Paris, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, etc.) will provide one with an embarrassment of riches for the analyst. Let us see how the selection process works in a live museum setting.

For the Harvard student, the museums of choice for an immediate stroll will be the Fogg or the Sackler. For argument’s sake, let us say we have chosen the Fogg. Make sure to bring relevant ID, as well as a pencil for note-taking (pens are never allowed in museum galleries). Once inside, there is a chance to orient oneself. The Fogg’s courtyard replicates an Italian villa, which means that through the upper-story windows you will catch glimpses of the art contained therein. Like many teaching museums, the Fogg is arranged chronologically. The oldest art (medieval and Renaissance) is on the ground floor, with more recent art arranged clockwise around the courtyard on the second floor. Though the art on display changes occasionally—the permanent collection being several orders of magnitude higher than the available space—like most museums, works are arranged in part according to rather old and confused ideas about what is most prestigious or worth seeing. The least respected objects (though by no means the least interesting) occupy stairwells. There is a room on the ground floor for changing, often thematic exhibitions. There is also a museum shop where one can find books on some of the relevant art—but at this point in the visit it is the original objects which interest us.

As one walks around it is worth jotting down names and dates of interesting works and artists. Dates are always worth writing down, because one forgets them easily, and because they compress so much useful knowledge about the historical matrix of a work of art. What interests one is one's own business; one should always be selfish in this respect instead of trying to work up enthusiasm for someone else's 'great' artists.

In my case, I am fascinated by a violently painted portrait of a woman, or rather of her head and shoulders, looming out of a smallish canvas. The sitter is *Emma Hart*, painted by the Englishman George Romney. Neither name is particularly resonant, but the object is arresting. There is something extreme about it, which makes the other nearby portraits seem less vibrant to me. This is a good sign. Sitting on a bench, I consider the artwork and its neighbors. This produces some doubt: there are a dozen interesting pictures in the room, some of which contain more obvious interpretive potential than my close-up portrait of an eighteenth-century woman. What to do?

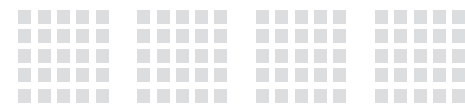
After a first stage of aesthetic gut reaction, many viewers experience a certain kind of vertigo or gnawing uncertainty as to what an art object is about. This is a natural reaction, since images do not speak of themselves: it is part of the life of artworks to have stories drawn out of them by the viewer. And works which seem particularly opaque or enigmatic tend to provide the most interesting challenge to the writer. Once one has chosen a piece (or several) to write about, enough time should be spent in their presence to get quite familiar with the physical reality of the objects—and to allow the imagination to work on them, supplying the mind with a variety of wild hypotheses.

## Taking Notes

Because our memories are unreliable—or, to put it differently, because we have strong imaginations—we humans take notes. Everyone has her own note-taking ritual, which is best left alone, but I will add some generalities in taking notes on art objects.

**Take notes on appearance.** By this I mean anything in the picture, from objects and people represented to the degree of reflection and cracks in the paint and style of the frame; if the object is a sculpture, color, texture, and shape from every conceivable angle. Do this even if you are able to take a photograph or find one elsewhere; you will be shocked by how much of this apparent information (from cracks and reflectance to frames) is omitted in even a *good* textbook photo. And most photos of artworks are terrible. If you don't have an opportunity to see the work of art in person, take notes on the best image you can find, or better yet on several. This might seem redundant if you're working with a reproduction anyway, but the freshness of a first look is not to be underestimated. You will see more things later, but when you dig up your first notes, you will also be surprised to discover how much you saw the first time that you missed later.

**Conduct a formal analysis.** In noting appearance, do not just state facts of vision, but *analyze them*. That is, organize your perceptions to yield useful generalizations about the work in question (e.g. "there is a dark mass in the upper-left-hand corner and a light mass diagonally across from in the lower-right"). Not only is this useful as shorthand (writing "pyramidal composition" is more concise than describing every object), but the acute attention of the first look will prompt structural insights you'll miss in a late-night writing session. This is especially true of work that doesn't reproduce well: three-dimensional sculpture, or, say, a contemporary art installation mixing sound and video projection. The spatial notes you take ("whispering sounds from rear wall, stock quotes



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projected at 45° angle from opposite corners”) will be far better and more explicit than the information contained in a murky catalogue photo.

**Jot down thoughts, ideas, sentiments.** As you busy yourself with facts of sensation, unbidden thoughts will clamor for your attention. “Creepy effect of dripping paint” or “excitement of destruction” might not be thesis candidates, or even sentences you want to introduce undigested into a finished essay, but they do contain a lot of information about the artwork and the way it affects its viewer, *you* in this case. They will be useful later, when the first emotional and intellectual associations provoked by the work have worn off, or have given way to different ones.

Of course, there is no reason to separate notes of the above three types, all of which have to do with articulating sensory information and the ideas it generates. But it might be useful, in a separate and clearly marked space, to write down the wall label information: artist name, date, and title, and whatever else is given. Does the art piece belong to someone beside the museum which is presently showing it? What are its exact dimensions? You may now think that the exact size is a silly formality, but you won’t be able hold your hands out to estimate size when you’re writing the paper. Do the curators provide interpretation as well, in the form of a paragraph or two about the work? Such texts are often uninteresting, having been trimmed for easy consumption, but they are the product of an immense amount of research on the part of curators and their assistants, so they do sometimes contain information that is of great interest to the researcher, or that will help you make some immediate sense of the piece. These texts are sometimes reproduced online or in catalogues, but most often not.



## Asking Questions

At this point in the game, things are going well. If one has been particularly timely in staking out the territory—choosing a work, thinking up preliminary ideas—this is the point where laziness or boredom threatens. It may seem that there is much you cannot yet know (“the exact meaning of the work”), or simply that there is “nothing more to be done” until you sit down and write the essay, or go to the library and do some research.

The problem with this mood is that it causes one to neglect going to the library (or sitting down to write) for weeks, by which time one’s excitement and inquisitiveness have been considerably blunted. There is no simple solution for the subjective ups and downs of writing, but there is a way to deny oneself excuses, particularly the one about “not knowing things, but I can look them up later.”

The solution here is simply to ask questions. These questions cannot serve as an easy way out of doing one’s own research. (If you *do* get ideas from other people that you absolutely have to use, you must cite them as the source of information—even if you later find the same information in a printed source). What asking questions can accomplish, however, is to stimulate one’s own curiosity about the work, open up unexpected ways to look at an object, or convince one that an object is genuinely interesting and in need of explication.

**Museum people.** One can make an appointment to discuss a work with a curator or an assistant. Unless the person in question is terribly busy (or unfriendly), they will usually have something pertinent to say; they also tend to have, in their files, crucial and otherwise difficult to find information about the work, from newspaper clippings to sales documents. Museum people tend to be sober and intelligent, so they are not usu-

ally a good audience for one's wildest theories about a work. Ask them instead concrete questions about a work's provenance, technique, and about the artist in question.

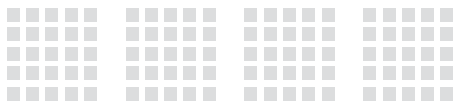
Whom else besides curators should one speak to in a museum? One is surrounded by visitors—those worth talking to are the ones interested in the same work as oneself. People are unused to talking in museums, which makes it all the more appealing—but don't yell. Tour guides occasionally plow by with their captive audiences. Here, of course, one does not want to intrude, but it pays to do some overhearing. And museum guards, provided they are not overworked shepherding a roomful of school kids, can be insightful. Some of them are artists, and in any case they have looked at the work on display longer than yourself and the curator combined.

**Librarians.** If you are seeking facts, or trying to work through a problem of interpretation yourself, the help you need is usually found in books. We will deal with books in great detail in the next chapter. But books do not exist in a vacuum. Whether or not you have access to a specialized art library (Harvard's Fine Arts Library is one of the best in the world), a reference librarian can point you to the right kind of books, even to books you may have hoped didn't exist. They can also help you fine-tune a computer search so that it will yield a manageable list of books instead of 0 or 1000. And, besides, librarians *read* books. They may know just what you need.

**Teachers.** Speaking of people who read books, the student will invariably turn to teachers, particularly the professor or teaching fellow who assigned the paper. There are excellent students who visit office hours weekly, and others who won't set foot in an instructor's office. This is a matter of personality. Either way it is important to do one's own thinking, as independently as possible from the competence of the teacher—after all, you're working towards a similar competence.

For questions that seem embarrassingly easy, or speculative, or when one just doesn't know how to start, no-one is as generous in entertaining far-fetched hypotheses as one's friends and peers (and why not, family). At the very least, you won't be suffering in their presence from any of the self-consciousness or performance anxiety felt in the vicinity of the teacher. This is crucial, because the point of asking questions is not to close the matter once and for all, but to get started formulating one's own answer.

There will be readers who have turned the last few pages with suspicion, and are now ready to skip to the next chapter in outrage. "Ask my mother? That would be the blind leading the blind!" First of all, your mother deserves better. Secondly, I know the feeling. I have written whole essays where, if the physical paper had gotten lost, no witness could be found to vouch for their existence. But this is a shame, not only because a socially produced essay is more enjoyable to write, but because the whole reason we write essays (and poems, and fiction) is to share our experience of the world. The offhand conversation you have with a friend about a sculpture may make a bigger impression on that individual, and thus on the world, than the entire finished essay: this is not to discount the essay, but to underline the value of intellectual openness and cooperation. This is less a matter of idealism than of developing good working habits. If you do not share your ideas before writing, you will be even less willing to do so once the work is complete and thus vulnerable. Academics and public intellectuals in general would make fewer errors, produce more insightful work, and perhaps even have their work stolen less often if they discussed that work more frequently and whole-heartedly.



## Research

In the last chapter, we were asking around about art; this kept our curiosity well-nourished and hopefully also stimulated a new craving for precise and objective forms of knowledge. We thus organically attained the attitude congenial to research. “Research” with a capital R is every student’s fear—perhaps because it is the bread and butter of academic life. One hears the following at conferences: “Ah yes, the idea is cool, but would you look at that dubious *research*?” But as with every other step in the writing process, one ought to view research not as a mysterious ritual, but as a means to an end. To paraphrase the physicist Ernst Mach, we research to live, not live to research. With such a practical mindset, the student may actually find doing research to be a lot of fun.

Research is the formal part of the information-gathering process. It is, in advance, potentially public. By this I do not mean that you will “publish” everything you find, but rather that any piece of information unearthed through research is fair game to appear in the final piece, given its proper reference. This involves a certain ethics of research. I have found that the impulse to disrespect intellectual property has much more to do with a lack of confidence than with wrongdoing. Students obtain information from dubious websites. Sometimes it isn’t the websites that are dubious, but the information (often the case with brief, superficial texts on museum sites). The student, ashamed of the source or the tenor of the information, paradoxically passes it off for his own, as if to draw attention away from the problematic passage. But the problem will only go away with the confident, self-conscious use of reputable sources. And with a healthy attitude of intelligent skepticism toward every source. For there is no authority incapable of error.

There is no authority  
incapable of error.

How, then, to conduct research? I will for convenience divide the vast resources available for research into three types: books, periodicals, and reference. While discussing these, we will have the opportunity to comment on manuscripts, the internet, mass media, and other heterogeneous forms of information that the researcher might wade through at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

**Books.** These are ‘easiest’ as objects in that we all know them since childhood. They are also, in some ways, the hardest objects to use well. Take art history books. There are at least three broad genres: surveys, monographs, and thematic studies. From a survey (say, E.H. Gombrich’s *The Story of Art*), one may get the general drift of an era or an entire tradition of art-making. Surveys, being dense compendia of knowledge, often have good bibliographies, pointing one to more specific sources.

A monograph is exactly what the title implies: a book on one single artist, often accompanied by an exhaustive list of annotated works (the *catalogue raisonné*). These books tend to have everything one needs and too much of it. That is, they are full of information on the subject of one’s interest, but understandably, they have not the slightest clue as to what interests you about it. The researcher must approach such books purposefully, selecting information and arguments relevant to her own thesis. Treated this way, monographs are indispensable. Catalogues in particular, which are published to accompany museum exhibitions, are often rich in images and at times contain important new discoveries about an artist or an oeuvre (body of work).

Thematic studies, books with titles like *Romanticism to Realism* and *Patrons and Painters*, often offer the most in terms of concentrated thinking about the subject at hand. These may be composed of unrelated essays, or form the chapters of a sustained argument. Ei-



ther way, what interests the researcher may not necessarily be the author's master thesis (though this is good to keep in mind), but a particular phase of her analysis—something one wants to borrow oneself, or put into question. Or otherwise an impressive fact gained through exhaustive research in a faraway archive. Indeed, one of the joys (and dangers) of perusing books with strong arguments is that, like it or not, the researcher is implicated in ongoing debates and forced to take sides in arguments that define the shape of the discipline. Beginning writers are often astonished by this “partisan” quality of writing in the humanities—but it is unavoidable. Simply by citing an author one has drawn attention to a particular current of thought! In turn, what such authors and their debates do for the researcher is sharpen her sense of the urgency of her own project (“this is *his* argument, now I need to state *mine*”). A good book, or at any rate a useful one, is one that you are impatient to put down in order to write your own.

**Periodicals.** Not that you have to write a book. Some of the most valuable writings on art are the shortest. But how to find them? Articles, long or short, are hidden in trade journals and ephemeral publications. These sometimes seem to require a lifetime and insider knowledge to locate and navigate. It is utterly worth it, however, and the modern student has a secret weapon: internet periodical databases. Whether the source is a tabloid newspaper or a learned journal published at Oxford, one can pinpoint the right issue and the place it can be perused, or even better, one can read the article in its entirety, with the aid of an internet search engine. The public Google Scholar is exemplary here, as is the private (but free to university students) Jstor. A brief example. There is a strange early nineteenth-century picture by the artist Gros of Napoleon touching the buboes of French plague victims in a Syrian hospital. The best work of scholarship on the subject is a concise three-page note published in the *English Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* in April 1941. One may obtain this apparently obscure publication simply by searching for “Napoleon” and “Gros” on Jstor.

Not every journal and old newspaper, of course, will be available or even searchable online. But university libraries have periodicals stacks (where magazines are generally bound together by year), and microform library where one can examine old newspapers in a film reader. While this involves more work than surfing the internet, the charm of turning old decomposing pages, and of encountering ancient advertisements, together with the thrill of discovery, more than make up for the inconvenience.

**Reference.** The third main resource for those conducting research is the great body of scholarly aids generally called reference. A better name might be *know-how*, because this is exactly that information that is taken for granted by people long familiar with a subject and unknown to everyone else. There are many ways of acquiring know-how. The safest, for academic purposes, comes between hard covers: dictionaries, encyclopedias, concordances and the like. Art historians, particularly those studying the religious art of ancient peoples, cannot function without dictionaries of iconography: the types of books that tell you under what circumstances an eagle stands for the Roman god Jupiter, or an albatross for Christ, and which provide the literary references one needs to substantiate such symbolism.

**Hearsay.** But there are also less formal sources of know-how. One familiar and generally acceptable source in academia is qualified hearsay: you listen to a professor go on for hours about the market orientation that determined late Roman art, and then you feel pretty confident, in the introduction of your essay, to merely allude generally to the “capitalism of Roman art production.” This is not fantastic procedure, but excusable. One should track the reference to its academic source (a book by Alois Riegl),

but the nature of powerful ideas is that they are communicated beyond those who have digested them in their entirety; such ideas, repeated orally and casually in writing, become commonplaces, useful if not as vivid as in their original formulations. The use of such is know-how pure and simple: but such ideas should be cited whenever one has them from a specific source (such as your professor's lecture).

**Internet.** We have reached the most controversial end of the reference spectrum. Some professors bluntly forbid the use of internet sources, expressing amazement for instance that "Harvard students refuse to set foot in a library." The problem with such a position is that it is intimidating. Students won't stop looking things up on the internet, they will simply stop citing such research. This is not only intellectually problematic, it is foolish: internet plagiarism is easier to catch than ever before, and more and more incautious students are dealing with the consequences.

The best policy for the student combines openness and awareness. There are, as with books, quality websites and dreadful ones. Professional academic reference works are usually impeccable; the standard for visual studies is the *Grove Dictionary of Art*, available through the HOLLIS catalogue to Harvard ID holders, and also on paper. Excellent also are international academic compendia like the Perseus Project, a mighty gathering of classical texts in original languages and in translation. But casual writers are more drawn to popular, open-source ventures like Wikipedia. Such sites are goldmines of information, and, at least in the eyes of many instructors, purveyors of fool's gold, error and misinformation.

There is no simple answer to the question "How should I use Wikipedia?" One can cite it as a source, if one must. If a teacher disallows it, one has no choice but leave it out—but one must also leave out the information found there. Be that as it may, there are natural and valuable approaches to using Wikipedia and other non-academic databases. The "natural" use is to consult such a source much as one would use hearsay: if one reads on Wikipedia some remarkable (and often, recent) fact about Buddhist statues destroyed by the Taliban, one could regard it as if one had received the same information, orally, from an intelligent person who is no accredited expert on the subject. That is, one may have an 'a-ha' moment: "I now understand the context, I can look up the exact dates elsewhere, or phrase what I have already have from paper sources more confidently, having obtained this crucial hint." Notice that this is also the way one would incorporate the suggestions obtained from the "asking questions" chapter above. The smart further use of such encyclopedic knowledge is to follow the citations that Wikipedia and other websites provide: these are usually to original journalism on the web, or to paper publications that the student can track down and confidently incorporate into an academic body of knowledge.

**The Footnote.** The subject of referencing works having cropped up more than once in our discussion, the reader may wonder just what exactly I mean by "following citations" or "citing sources," given the diverse ways such words would be interpreted in various intellectual disciplines. The footnote is deceptively marginal; it has its own fascinating history, and a whole book has been written about it.<sup>1</sup> I can only speak for the humanities, not for the natural and the social sciences, which have their own rules and dynamics of citation. In art history, as in political history and literary criticism, the art of the footnote (or endnote: the preference depends on the author, and sometimes

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<sup>1</sup>Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

is imposed by the publisher or professor) is part and parcel of the process of writing *and* reading.

For the writer, the footnote has both a modest and an ambitious function. The modest function is to give the source for a particular piece of information, for a quotation, or for a whole idea or way of looking at things. This is done briefly but fully, as in the example above, which conforms with the “Chicago style” typical of humanities publications. I’ll pass over the formalities, which can be discovered in any writer’s manual on paper or on the web. The basic content of the footnote, however, is rich in meaning: an author is given, the title of a work (often suggestive enough), then a place and year of publication, and a publisher. For a reader, this information allows not only the tracking down of the original source for perusal, but the ability to imagine where the present writer is getting an argument or a piece of information (“Ah, the *Interpretation of Dreams*, this is a Freudian reading...”). Such speculation should not be taken too far, but if done modestly it conveys to the reader an eloquent context for the present argument.

“Eloquent context” might also be our catch-phrase for the smart use of the footnote by the writer. For, in addition to stating one’s sources, the author may write a sentence, or several, in the footnote.<sup>2</sup> This allows the writer to wander down a fascinating side road without bogging down the main narrative; the footnote is also the place to comment on the main text, to state a reservation or point out a humorous incongruity without loading down the text itself with all the accumulated weight of banter. Finally, the footnote is a nice place to banish an unnecessary sentence before deleting it finally: if it doesn’t read well in the text, and it doesn’t read well in the footnote, cut it.

### *The Research ‘Big Picture’, or conducting research without getting lost in details.*

Research, like most forms of collecting, can become an obsession. Yet there are factors a researcher can attend to in order to reassure herself that she is on the right track overall. One crucial aspect of art research is a steady acquisition not just of written notes, but of images. Photocopies, if permitted and affordable, work fine; so do digital camera images, provided again that they are allowed (don’t ever use a flash) and that you have enough light and hold the camera steady so that the image will be sharp. In the last resort, which may in fact be a real resort in some restrictive gallery or archive reading room—one can even attempt to *draw* the picture in question. As in note-taking, the object in such doodling is not to practice one’s own artistic skills so much as to fix for the time being one’s observations in a visual medium.

Speaking of fixing things, while intellectual style permits a wild variety of note-taking paraphernalia (little black books, quad-rule notebooks, napkins, library cards and notes on the back of one’s hand), the best note-taking is done more or less *one piece*: a single notebook to which observations are added, or a single computer file (external backup is a must). Not only are collated notes less likely to get lost, but they are more likely to end up in the finished paper, which, in turn, is likely to end up more coherent.

The profound and overarching question about research is: when have we got enough? In other words, when do we stop? Many experienced researchers work with the single-mindedness of a squirrel gathering supplies for the winter. But, as with the squirrel, there must be at least an instinctive sense of how much is enough, and indeed of what

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<sup>2</sup> Such asides are to be avoided when devoid of informative content—as then they are merely distracting.

particularly is useful and what need not be gathered at all. The student, working with a specific work or artist, a theme, and preferably even a provisional thesis, should have some sense that his questions are being answered by the research already done. Unfortunately, there is always more that can be done: knowledge is apparently infinite.

The best way to gain some distance from one's compulsive research practice might be to split up one's work time into *general* and *directed* research. The general research comes first. Its purpose is to equip one with the set of basic facts necessary for writing. If you have tried to begin an essay when all you had were ideas, and no solid facts, you'll understand the utility of this type of research: without facts, even the best ideas will sound strangely noncommittal. Once this stage of research is completed—in short, once you have enough raw materials that you can couch your ideas in specifics—you can proceed to directed research. Here, you are no longer interested in *everything* about a subject, but only in those facts and interpretations that support or challenge your own argument. The “or challenge” is important here: don't simply shy away from contradiction; wrestling with them will make your argument stronger. In the directed research mode, one is reading more and taking fewer notes than in the first stages of research: for instance, one may be looking for all the major feminist interpretations of Assyrian imperial sculpture. Eventually, you will find the same texts you have read referenced in the footnotes of new texts you are reading—and no new texts mentioned. By this point, you have completed a cycle, and may with confidence consider the field well-covered. Of course, the volume of research existing on some topics is so vast that one will never complete the circle. In this case, directed research ends only when you have satisfied your curiosity. Have you answered the questions posed at the beginning of research? Raised new ones? Gathered enough material for writing?

Two hours might be wasted struggling to invent an explanation where an hour's research would have yielded a necessary fact.

The student on deadline may suffer from an opposite problem: the temptation not to research. Unfortunately, if she gives in to this temptation, she will find the paper more difficult to write. Two hours might be wasted in front of one's screen struggling to invent an explanation where an hour's research would have yielded a necessary fact or existing interpretation. Moreover, essays written in the absence of research have a labored, far-fetched quality that even the best writing cannot mask. It is, of course, possible to do honorable research and to discover in the middle of writing that you are missing crucial information. This happens even to the most dedicated researchers. The only solution is to regard the end of research as *provisional*, at least until the paper is completed and turned in. You may have to dash to the library the night after finishing the paper—still, this is better than the morning the paper is due. And remember: if you are stuck looking for a fact that no amount of research will uncover, ask a librarian or the professor. It may turn out to your relief that the information simply doesn't exist.

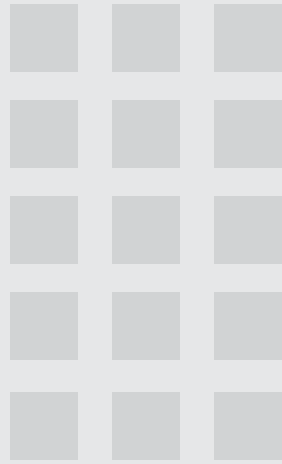
# Intermezzo: What is Art?

The reader, in the process of looking, writing, or thinking, may often be struck by a seemingly absurd question: “Wait a minute, what exactly is art?” The question only seems absurd because there are not many disciplines that one could practice without some sense of what they consist in. Certainly, historians are forced to deal with boundary questions that do not plague practitioners: a chemist does not usually ask herself “what is chemistry?” but a historian of science may legitimately wonder whether a recipe to turn lead into gold is chemistry. In the same way, art historians are confronted with cultural practices (from religious rituals to advertising) and objects (from ancient eating utensils to modern video games) that challenge their preconceptions about the fixed nature of art, but also often challenge them to set *some* boundaries lest the field become too fuzzy to come into focus at all.

So, to the question “What is art?” though the discussion is vast and will never be settled for good, one can identify what may be termed a cautious and a sweeping answer. The cautious answer has much to recommend it: it has emerged from a real attempt on the part of the art historical community (still largely white, European) to come to terms with the problematic colonial history of the acquisition and definition of art objects. To put it briefly, African, Native American, and Oceanian artifacts were at first collected as evidence of ‘primitive’ development and comparative Western might; separated from

their users, they languished in ethnological museums, until a generation of modern artists and art dealers discovered these objects as exemplars of “pure” or “abstract” art, a redefinition that drove up their price as well as their prestige. The modern art historian, then, would do well to turn a critical eye to claims about the aesthetic value of such objects (and, indeed, of Western art objects as well), examining the things in their original contexts of creation and use, insofar as this can be reconstructed. Art, according to this view, is simply that which is regarded as art by artists, art professionals, and audiences. As such, art and aesthetic appreciation are necessarily matters of convention. Indeed, artists took the lead in uncovering this conventional, consensual dimension of “treating objects as art.” When Marcel Duchamp displayed an upturned urinal in the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, what connected his gesture to the work of his peers was the assertion of the artist’s role in *choosing* what got to count as art.

The conventional view of art stated above, which we also called the cautious view, has its problems. On the one hand, it might seem authoritarian to simply *assign* art meaning to objects on the basis of one’s expertise as an artist or artworld insider. On the other, objects which clearly function as art—like Emily Dickinson’s poems, hidden in the walls of her room, or Francisco Goya’s last paintings, applied likewise to the walls of his house—were never presented as such by

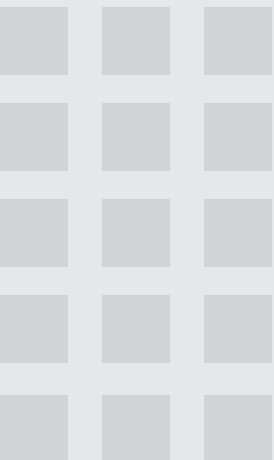


their authors, were never in fact presented at all. Should we coyly re-class these works, along with ancient and non-western sculpture, as striking but not belonging to our conventional universe of art objects? Finally, how open-minded and fair to other cultures is the conventional view stated above? If we learn that the ancient Greeks had no word exactly corresponding to our “art,” but had other words, *technē* and *poesis*, which described the activity of craftsmen and talented writers respectively; do we conclude with a sigh of relief that Greek vases and tragedies are “their own thing” and incompatible with our artistic concerns, or do we strive to expand our understanding of what art is to encompass some radically different traditions?

This last question leads us to suggest the more sweeping definition of art, which, however, should be applied with the same care as the cautious definition. According to this broad view, what is interesting to students of art is not just artistic convention but the *aesthetic dimension* of human activity. This aesthetic dimension may be articulated in terms of beauty, visual interest, intellectual or emotional persuasiveness, religious import, etc. It need not necessarily imply an eternal “aesthetic organ” in the human animal. In accord with the two strategies of art historical argument we discussed (formalist and contextualist), study of the aesthetic may choose to isolate

this component, or determine its connections to the other, ‘impure,’ qualities found in any object—its politics, use value, monetary worth. A classic book on the Italian Renaissance, for instance, compares painting with courtly dance and also with the art of marketplace haggling.

Such an example suggests not only the power but also the dangers of the sweeping definition of art. With enough imagination, one may naively elevate any object to the status of art, or discern an aesthetic dimension where it hardly matters. The admiration and irritation provoked by the semioticians (students of signs) of the 1960s, when they set out to expose the aesthetic assumptions prevalent in fashion, advertising, and news photography, has something to do with this impertinence: surely there is an aesthetic dimension to TV wrestling, but is that the crucial thing about the phenomenon? One can correct the excesses of the aesthetic approach by paying attention, as the cautious approach reminds us, to the effects of elevating something to the status of art. In being so forearmed, the student might be able to evade both the narrow eurocentrism that finds art only in a catalogue or museum, and the naïve missionary zeal that seeks to bestow the prestige of art on activities that are better considered under another name.





# Part Two: Writing

## The Writer's Tools

Since we have discussed both the visual and the bookish sides of research, we must finally broach the writing process. But note: we have already been doing quite a bit of writing, from the first encounter with the piece in the museum to the accumulation of research. What we are in fact doing here under the header of ‘official’ writing is considering the essay as a whole. As such, the goal will be to combine the extraordinary diverse wealth of materials we already possess—visual information, historical facts, notes on interpretation and bits of argument—into a coherent framework that will communicate to a reader (fairly unacquainted with our subject) our knowledge and our point of view on this knowledge, in the form of an argued thesis. As such, essay writing requires three major operations: top-down planning, rewriting of existing materials, and finally, new writing. Before beginning this process, we will take another look at the writer’s intellectual tools, particularly those relevant to writing about art.

Because the sensations produced in us by art objects get mixed up with our emotional reactions to these impressions, art writing contains within it a strong subjective dimension. Alas, we are taught early in our academic experience to suppress all emotion. I still recall the teacher who marked my first art history assignment with the disapproving label “value judgment.” Yet value judgments that are suppressed do not vanish; they go underground. Why? Probably because art always engages the viewer’s emotions and cognitive faculties (“*This* is wonderfully complex; *that* is simplistic nonsense”). To be an art writer, one must first be a viewer.

That is not to say we should produce overwrought diary entries. Good writing does not wear its heart on its sleeve. But a writer who is aware of his subjectivity is better able to determine how much of it belongs in the finished paper. The writer’s task is to think through immediate reactions to art and to render them intelligible to the reader. In doing this, the writer must be aware of three categories that govern the discourse on art. *Criticism* emerged from an Enlightenment public that demanded newspaper reviews of art and other cultural goods; art *history* as we practice it today out of a nineteenth-century curiosity about the concrete facts of art production by geographically and temporally diverse peoples; art *theory*, which is at least as old as Greek philosophy, attempts to understand what it is about art that appeals to people or has a specific effect on them. In writing about art, we often want to engage in all three of these intellectual activities. Nevertheless, it is worth familiarizing oneself with their procedures separately.

*Criticism.* The newspaper or magazine critic attempts to come to grips with the art object through language. She is concerned particularly with the new. While there is a descriptive task involved (simply describing new art), and a journalistic one (being aware of the new art, attending the shows, speaking with artists and curators), the critic is above all concerned to tell the viewer what is good, bad, or interesting, in short, what to go see. In describing and judging works of art, the critic relies on a tool developed by the art historian, and which we have already encountered: formal analysis.

*Formal analysis* focuses on the perceptible aspects of a work of art, sometimes in great detail. If you’ve read a newspaper critic writing about ‘old master’ paintings, or a Ger-

# part two

man art historian, you perhaps already anticipate an impenetrable lingo composed in equal parts of Italian and geometric terms. This is a cliché, but with a kernel of truth. Formal analysis comes partly from the studio jargon of Italian Renaissance artists; on the other hand, out of the specialized vocabulary of German aestheticians and psychologists of the previous century, who were interested in how the human mind perceives the world. Since these scholars wish to separate discussions of art's physicality from the "yes or no of the palate", and also from the metaphors of the poet, they invented an abstract vocabulary that describes and organizes the physical attributes of art objects. Formal analysis, at its purest, consists of sets of binary oppositions. A *painterly* surface, rich encrusted with layers of pigment, is opposed to a *linear* one, on which clear marks dominate a thin surface. A *symmetrical* stable arrangement of bodies in space is opposed to an *asymmetrical* massing with all the dynamism that implies. *Volume*, which can be conveyed in the three-dimensional mass of a sculpture, or in the vigorous shading of two-dimensional forms by Leonardo da Vinci (*chiaroscuro*), is contrasted to the emphasis on contour in the calligraphic style of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. We can divide space even more basically: *vertical* is opposed to *horizontal*, and both are opposed by *diagonal*.

It should be obvious from this last example that formal opposites are not so exclusive as night and day, nor entirely value-free. One work of art can contain a wealth of both vertical and horizontal lines (and diagonals too, as happens in Impressionist pictures of boats). It can contain an arrangement that strikes one viewer as complexly balanced, another as quite asymmetrical. It may also strike the critical observer that at bottom, the formal vocabulary is quite simple—or simplistic. How many terms should be learned? There are several more or less readable glossaries of art jargon, but as with any language, more is learned by reading in context (by doing your own reading) than by browsing a dictionary. Indeed, formal language is less useful in establishing permanent distinctions than in clarifying how things differ from one another, relatively speaking. Therefore, formal writing works is most revealing when comparing two or more objects.

Let us take two works that are fairly disparate, Josef Albers's 1927 glass sculpture *Overlapping* (Fig.2), and Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's 1765 oil painting on the subject of *The Apotheosis of Aeneas* (Fig.3). Whatever we might have to say about the sensuous qualities of these objects apart is certainly sharpened by the juxtaposition. Where Albers's panel is monochrome, rectilinear (that is, full of rectangles or right angles), abstract (or non-objective: there is no obvious thing or person represented), and mechanical in surface (glossy, but the glass has been sanded to a matte finish in the gray areas), Tiepolo's canvas is richly polychrome, with earthy browns and cream tones punctuated by primary colors (red, blue, and yellow fabrics), painterly in execution (the paint rises and falls in visible brushstrokes: a state that, in its extreme, is called *impasto*), and abounds in dynamic, diagonal groupings (of people and clouds). We may even notice a surprising similarity: both works are vertical in format, roughly twice as tall as they are wide. And the observations about one can illuminate the other: comparing our two lists, we may note that Albers *also* plays with asymmetry, overlapping his rectangular bodies in a pattern leaning right; on the other hand, that Tiepolo is representing a mythological figure (Aeneas, the founder of Rome), but in a decorative arrangement (an "apotheosis" or triumph is not a full story) nearly as abstract as Albers's machined surfaces. We may also be struck by the arbitrariness of calling *Overlapping* a sculpture: though Albers made the piece by pouring hot black glass onto a white glass surface, the two-dimensional object produced has more in common with a painting in the way it is perceived than with an industrially produced sculpture 'in the round.'

Formal analysis is most revealing when comparing two or more objects.

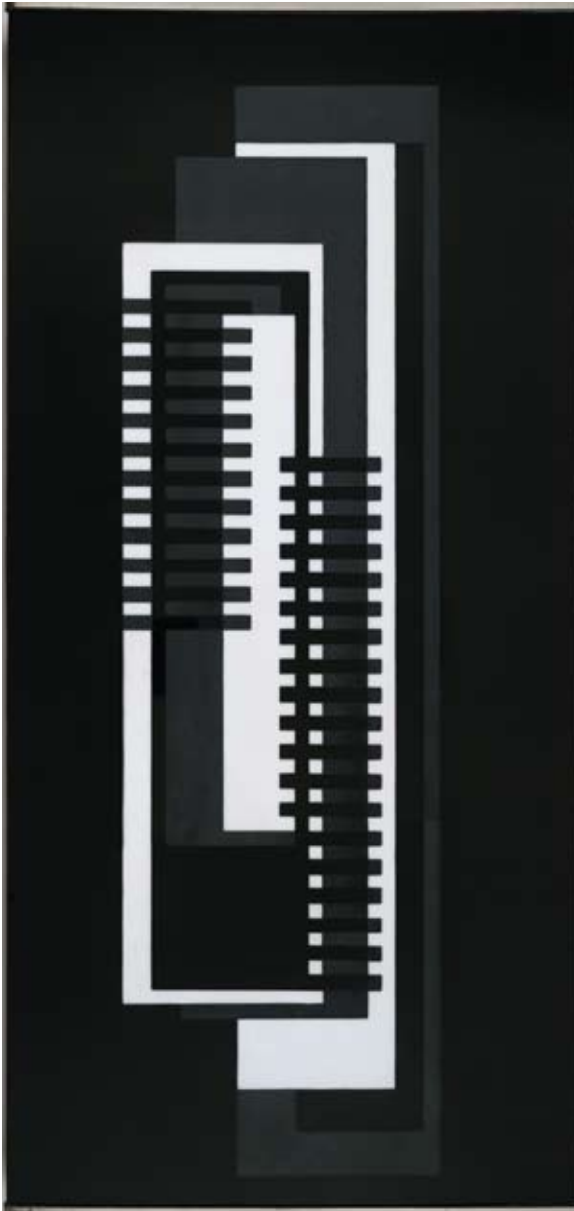


Fig.2 Josef Albers, *Overlapping*, 1927, opaque black glass flashed on milk glass.



Fig.3 Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *The Apotheosis of Aeneas*, c.1765, oil on canvas.

The reader may note that we have not produced a “thesis” about either work or both together. Yet we have gone some way toward illuminating how such a thesis could be made. Suppose I want to argue that Albers based his geometric abstraction on generic Baroque apotheosis scenes like Tiepolo’s. First, I would have to qualify my argument to fit the information I’ve gathered: I would only be able to point to the vertical format of the pieces, and to the overlapping, diagonally placed masses. At this point, the awareness of a task at hand might inspire me to further formal observation: I might say that the contrasting white, gray, and black in Albers has much of the rhythm of brown, yellow, and blue colors of Tiepolo’s sky scene. Here, we are able to glimpse both the subjective power and the temptation offered by formal analysis. Is my observation of “rhythms” not applicable to a hundred other pictures? There is no simple answer here. The best way to proceed is not to stake too much on any single observation, which after all is produced by our imagination *based* on the picture, rather than being an attribute of the picture itself. Like a detective’s torn and illegible piece of paper at a crime scene, it does not prove anything by itself, but may be combined with other clues to form a plausible narrative.

*Art history.* The thesis we broached above has brought us into the confines of historical writing. Unlike criticism, art history is concerned not with value judgments but with uncovering of temporal and cultural relationships. As such, art history requires of the writer a narrative account of a work’s relationship to other works, to its time, or to another. Formal analysis can serve as the building block of such narrative. When the art historian uses only or primarily formal analysis to argue a case of compositional similarity (as we did above), the result is a formalist history. There is however another form of narrative: the narrative contained *within* representational works of art such as Tiepolo’s. Though we dismissed this earlier as a generic victory scene, the stories about Aeneas (refugee from Troy and founder of the Roman race, if not of the city), and their literary resonance (Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and its Italian reception) are surely relevant to our understanding of Tiepolo’s project. Such concerns should remind the reader of the contextualist style of history that finds connections between a work and its milieu.

Art history, then, embraces both formal and contextual analysis. Even when we attempt a purely formal analysis, we invariably sneak in knowledge, such as the fact about Albers pouring black glass on white. At times, such knowledge comes easily: the Albers process can be gathered from a careful reading of the caption below the picture in the Harvard Art Museums catalogue (also online). The *Aeneid*, likewise, comes up in any dictionary entry on *Aeneas*. Yet one could keep going: would a full reading of the *Aeneid*, in Latin, help? Unlike a text in a difficult language, an art object will not “tell you” when it’s comprehensible—when you can stop translating. The student may legitimately wonder: how much “outside” knowledge is enough? The answer is purely personal, as long as we realize that it is not “outside” knowledge that is needed at all, but rather “inside” knowledge, knowledge we need to further our interpretation, and which we may pass on to the reader, though not always.

Besides thinking up a historical connection, the art historian must clarify how the thesis proposed relates to the actual objects discussed. Regarding our thesis of Albers appropriating Baroque composition, we have to be clear what that implies for Tiepolo. It doesn’t mean that Albers knew this *particular* painting—so arguments about Virgil or the *Aeneid* have little bearing on Albers. On the other hand, Albers, a lifelong art teacher and writer on art, was hardly unaware of Baroque painting in general or even Tiepolo specifically. In this sense we can speak of an affinity, and we lack only a cultural

or psychological account of why this might take place. But a brief investigation into Baroque culture (sponsored by state and church in Southern Europe) and Albers' own Bauhaus (an ultramodern art school in Weimar Germany) might suggest that Albers was attracted to the Baroque marriage of state sponsorship and ambitious art. This linkage is decisively closed to modernist German artists by the rise of fascism.

Our thesis is thus enriched by both formal and political interests. Their full statement in essay form would require expanding on the formal motifs discussed (asymmetry, verticality) and a more detailed account of Albers' views on the Baroque. But how do the formal and the historical evidence connect? One can write history without answering this question, but the attempt to answer it involves us in some account of how art relates to human life in general, and thus in the discourse of art theory.

*Art theory.* We use the term, theory, in preference to aesthetics ('the science of beauty') or a more specific identifier like the philosophy of art, partly because the explanation we have in mind might not have anything to do with beauty or art per se but rather with some aspect of the historical reality that plays a role in our account of art. For example, I have read a fine paper about Archaic Greek funerary statues (famous for their smile), in which the student used results from social psychology (studies of athletes smiling for the public) to argue that the smile of archaic statues reenacted for the viewer the deceased subjects' sporting victories. This conceptual framework is not a general explanation of art—it could not be applied to Albers's *Overlapping*, for instance.

What this suggests, rightfully, is that "theory" as understood by art scholarship is not one coherent body of knowledge. It need not even be *current*—one may be interested in medieval theories of sainthood, for instance. This methodological anarchy is a golden opportunity for the student, since there is no 'standard protocol' to learn, but only a demand to link up the concept forcefully to the physical object. The student should begin with what she knows or what interests her, and think through its relations to the art in question. This does not mean one can engage in complacent regurgitation: say the student knows astrophysics and wishes to write about Mayan miniatures. There might be no relation between the two subjects, or only a very far-fetched one. But with a little imagination and research, the student may find a very profitable relation between Mayan miniatures and Mayan theories of astronomy and astrology—topics that are certainly amenable to the student's astrophysical background.

The two examples discussed above demonstrate the breadth of theoretical involvement possible: one may apply a model that fits closely with the art in question, or even a model so different that it casts the art in sharp relief. Yet, like history and formal analysis, conceptual models should be used with care: it is a matter of establishing friendly relations between objects and ideas, not of subjugating one to the other. Some writers think this means frequent disclaimers: "this doesn't *have* to mean what I say it means." This is disingenuous: why make an argument if you don't believe it? A better approach is to acknowledge precisely those aspects of the theory that don't fit the physical objects. In our Josef Albers example, we could admit that Albers' interest in industry has nothing to do with the Baroque. Such a limitation of the applicability of one's model is not just modesty—it makes one's argument more precise and persuasive within its narrowed field. One last thing to say about conceptual tools is that the student should be confident about them. I still recall the combination of shame and paranoia with which I inserted references to science, literature, or politics in art history essays; they were probably the most interesting things I had to say in those papers.

We want to establish friendly relations between objects and ideas, not subjugate one to the other.





## Outlining

Once we have done some research, and have some idea of what to write about, it is time to construct an outline. Personal feelings about outlines vary. Some people never write them—outlinephobes. Others, like myself, write outlines even for essays they never write—outlinephiles. There is no need to try to change one’s deeply ingrained habits, but one should be aware of the benefits of outlining, even if concisely, or mentally.

What is at stake in outlining is the act of producing a story, with its own logic, and sequence of events. The beginning draws one in, the conclusion ties up loose ends. As such, a strong *thesis* quite often emerges while outlining. The benefit of a good outline is that it will help you anchor this thesis in the facts you have gathered. One does this simply by deciding what to include and *where* to put it for maximum effect. The crudest outline consists of just three elements: what comes first, in the middle, and last.

Let’s see a concrete example. Say I have a collection of notes for an essay on Chinese earthenware sculptures of the Yuan Dynasty (circa fourteenth century C.E.). In particular, I’ve chosen to write about two objects, *Seated Arhat Holding a Fly-Whisk* (Fig.4) and *Seated Arhat with Hands Resting on Upraised Knee* (Fig.5). My research indicates that an *Arhat* is a being who has reached spiritual perfection, and on death is not reborn. The only difference between a Buddha and an Arhat is that the Buddha has achieved spiritual perfection on his own, while the Arhat has reached it by following a religious teaching. Furthermore, I know that in the Mahāyāna school of Buddhism, widespread throughout North Asia in this period, an Arhat is often portrayed rather negatively as concerned narrowly with his own spiritual liberation.<sup>3</sup> Were I a specialist in Chinese politics, court poetry, or Buddhist theology, I might pursue the matter further, but let us assume (as is the case), that this is all I know about the historical context of the works. Given that I am working with two images, I want to make some sort of claim about them in common—perhaps that they correspond to the Mahāyāna view of Arhats—and, perhaps, going a bit further, to distinguish, however subtly, between the two sculptures. I am encouraged in this by the fact that these extraordinary sculptures strike me as in some ways alike, and in some ways quite different.

What’s the simplest outline possible? 1. *The Mahāyāna Arhat in 14th-century Chinese Sculpture*. 2. *Similarities between Arhat Sculptures* 3. *Differences among Arhat Sculptures*. This isn’t as bad as it sounds: I can introduce the notion of the Arhat as a *nearly* perfect being, discuss what the works have in common, and finally how they differ. On the other hand, my outline is less than inspired. For starters, my first and second sections don’t sound all that different, and I end somewhat blandly with “how the statues differ,” which seems to dilute any strong take-home message. Can I improve the outline? Not without thinking a bit more specifically about my material. The first section can remain in its present state, as it introduces the problem I wish to discuss. The second section could use greater definition. I should decide, even if temporarily, what the two works share that is relevant to my interest. I notice, in looking at them, that they have in common a conventional, even idealized representation of a genial old man, bald and contemplative. The faces in particular are strikingly similar; if I knew enough about Yuan sculpture, I might claim that they are the work of the same artist or workshop.

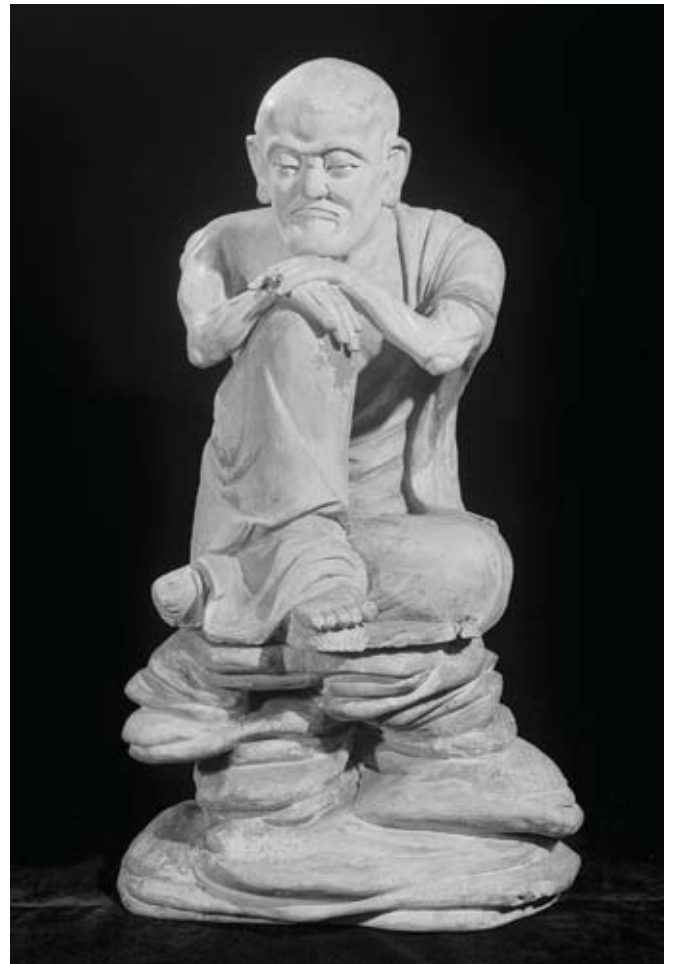
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<sup>3</sup>“Arhat” and “Mahāyāna” *A Dictionary of Buddhism*. Ed. Damien Keown. Oxford University Press, 2003. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Harvard University Library. 12 December 2007





**Fig.4 Seated Arhat (Lohan) Holding a Fly-Whisk, Chinese, perhaps 14th century, Yuan Dynasty, earthenware with polychromy.**



**Fig.5 Seated Arhat (Lohan) with Hands Rested on Up-raised Knee, Chinese, perhaps 14th century, Yuan Dynasty, earthenware with polychromy.**

Since I don't (it may turn out that many, many sculptures of Arhats from different hands sport the same stylized grimace), I am not tempted to make that argument. But I have the conventional image of the contemplative elder as a common point. What's different? On first blush, I notice the emphatic symmetry of the first Arhat, so different from the more informal pose of the second, with his slouch and his arms resting on his knee. I further notice that the first Arhat's fly-whisk is a surprising commonplace detail, seemingly at odds with his spiritual state; I am not quite sure what to make of this, but combining the two observations, I might say the third part of the essay (about the differences) is about realism within Arhat representation.

My new outline looks like this: *1. The Mahāyāna Arhat in 14th-century Chinese Sculpture. 2. Idealized Old Age in Religious Sculpture 3. Representation of Reality in Religious Sculpture.* This is already an improvement. The thesis is not just flatly stated, but developed through a comparison and a contrast, after stating the pertinent cultural context of the art. How do I proceed from here? By subdividing these headings into sections that better correspond to the order of paragraphs I will write. Section 1, for instance, might begin by defining Arhat, stating the difference between classical Buddhism and the Mahāyāna School interpretation of Arhats, raise the question of which is at stake in our fourteenth century exemplars. This is good progress! What is important is that, in enumerating these steps and setting them in their proper chronological order, I make the task of writing easier. So I have section 1. *The Arhat: 1a) The Arhat in Buddhism; 1b) The Mahāyāna School Idea of the Arhat; 1c) The Yuan Dynasty Arhat Sculpture: Which Interpretation?* Even without being sure how I will answer the question, I am confident I have gotten the reader's attention, in a solidly historical way.

I can subdivide section two in the same way, say: *2. Idealized Arhat Representation: 2a) Idealized Anatomy (Symmetry, posture) 2b) Idealized Old Age (representation of aging as wisdom through conventions like baldness).* Notice that as the outline becomes more differentiated, new ideas are developed and the basic thesis is fleshed out. By this point in my brainstorming, I am ready to sort out my conflicting impressions about section three. I found the flyswatter "realistic," but also the second Arhat's more relaxed pose. I also notice the protruding bones and wiry musculature of the second Arhat (particularly his exposed right shoulder). I am ready to distinguish between the two types of reference to reality. In the first sculpture, an everyday object is put in the hands of an idealized, symmetrical body; in the second, informality of pose, costume, and anatomy hints to the Arhat's previous humanity. I can also see that the two strategies, though different, converge: both images refer to banal humanity, as if to anchor these otherwise fully spiritual beings. I begin to think this is not best described as conflicting "realisms," but of different ways of conjoining profane and spiritual nature. My outline for section three: *3. The Arhat's Humanity: 3a) Everyday Objects (first Arhat) 3b) The mortal body (second Arhat) 3c) The down-to-earth as a means of signaling the Arhat's humanity.* The last section can serve as a restatement or elaboration of your thesis. Notice that this outline, while rich in possible directions, does not constrain you to one line of argument: you may think these Arhats are in fact depicted as sub-Buddhas, or that the human touch does not detract from their sanctity (seen in the conventions discussed in section two), or most subtly (which is not always best), that there is a tension between the pedestrian and the spiritual in this representation that might lend itself to a Mahāyāna or to a non-Mahāyāna interpretation. A good outline won't paint you into a corner: one's instinct, and the force of the argument, should sway you when writing.

The outline is still pretty modest—the real work will be to match up my existing

notes with these sections, and to write the remaining text to connect the parts—but, with its new subdivisions, it has already developed into a more interesting work than I began with. Most importantly, we have watched an argument develop, as if before our eyes. Although one may begin with an argument already formed in one’s head, the act of subdividing the sections of one’s essay will itself *generate* an argument, or at least a trajectory that will collaborate with your argument by helping you prove it. For this reason, it is helpful while working on the outline to jot down thesis ideas (or modifications—your thesis might change!), as they will be coming thick and fast with the marking out of your narrative sequence.

An outline is indispensable, and if you stick with it, priceless in clarifying the *content* of your paper. What does it do to your *style*? Briefly, there are two approaches to expository writing: the “state your case clearly” school, which insists on a thesis at the very beginning, repeated and reinforced in each section of the essay, and the “pleasure of discovery” school, which recommends drawing in your reader with an interesting opener, stating your thesis at the end of the introduction, or even more deviously, revealing it little by little so that it dawns on your reader fully only once you have made your case. Art historians, caught between social sciences on one hand and literature on the other, have trouble agreeing on one strategy. Personal preference plays a role, and a good approach usually steers between the two extremes. But, whatever your style may be, it is worth *arguing* with the reader early on (it gets her attention), whether or not you are ready to state your argument fully, or even know it fully yourself.

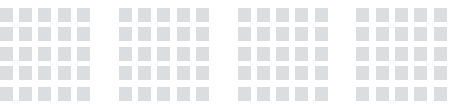
This last piece of advice may disturb readers who think one must know what one wishes to write before writing. But insights, reversals, and new discoveries are constantly made while writing. If you change your mind about the thesis of the essay on the second-to-last page, should you go back and change everything? You should, if the new insight makes your preceding argument just plain wrong, or unconvincing. But what if your new insight requires the statement of the earlier thesis in order to make sense? In such a case, it is best to introduce the early thesis cautiously, as a *hypothesis* and not as the last word on the subject. Then, when stating your final position, you have the opportunity to present it as a refinement of your starting point, in that it better fits the facts. In my case, I began with the claim that the Arhats are believed to be less than holy (hypothesis A), and in my middle section argued that in Arhat statues humanity and spirituality coexist (thesis B). The last section reconciles these two not quite identical positions: I argue that the culture of Mahāyāna Buddhism saw Arhats as partly human and thus less than perfect, but that in art-making, this resulted in a playful realism that made them a popular subject of sculpture, rather than emphasizing their second-class status in the pantheon.<sup>4</sup>

Such a shift in thesis is not bad, if it adds to your explanation of the works under investigation. In most cases, a simple thesis works best; but you should not force a simple thesis dogmatically on resistant material. This is a real danger in writing about works of art because they are silent, so to speak, compared to literary texts. Since the thesis is *your* invention, it should be fitted to the objects, not the other way around.

It is worth *arguing* with the reader early on: it gets her attention.

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<sup>4</sup>To fully argue this point, we should compare our Arhats with Buddha images, and adduce evidence that the two sets of artwork enjoyed equivalent aesthetic status regardless of theological distinctions between their subjects. This could plausibly be the objective of a fully researched scholarly article on the subject.



## Reorganizing

We will have more to say about beginnings, conclusions, and making arguments in the chapter on writing proper. But since our strategy is to do as much of the hard work of writing as possible *in advance* of actually sitting down to type, we will now move on to a complicated but rewarding pastime, the editing and revision of existing material. At this point in the writing process, you have looked, researched, and prepared an outline. The task now is to organize and gain a modicum of control over the pile of photocopies, handwritten notes, and images that earlier preparation has provided.

Two items are crucial to this step: a highlighter and a computer text file. The marker should be kept ready to hand while looking over one's handwritten notes, over one's printed notes, but especially over photocopies from books and printed articles. Never highlight in a library book or even in one's own book; not only does the ink damage the book, but all the added emphasis will make the book difficult to use for later readers, including oneself. *Copies* of texts you need to use in the essay, however, with their indiscriminate rows and rows of writing, are in desperate need of a pruning and emphasis: highlight whatever strikes you as interesting, or better yet what you would like to *use* or to quote directly. (Suffice it to say that a page where everything is highlighted is no more useful than one where nothing is highlighted—less, because of the waste of time involved.) Next, arrange the re-read texts in some sort of working order: you can cluster them together if they deal with the same issue, and arrange them according to the place in your essay where you are planning to use them. Here, the outline will dictate your order; one might improve the outline by marking what texts will be used under each heading.

At the end of this operation, the student will have at her disposal a pile of ordered, notated texts ready to be consulted in the writing of the essay. One pile is best, as that will allow the writer to move the already-used texts to a second, “used” pile, where they can be consulted again if necessary, but where the writer will be confident that a text has not slipped through the cracks. The writer who demands even more organization, or who is more comfortable working exclusively on the computer, can either skip the highlighting step and simply transcribe all useful notes into a text file (naturally, with full author and title references and page numbers, as these things are fiendishly difficult to find afterwards). Or alternately she can take another look the pile of highlighted documents, transcribing important quotes, paraphrases, and summaries into one working text file. This file will provide an ordered, edited store of data that can be incorporated directly into the essay (with proper quotation marks and references, of course). It will also provide the writer with the psychological satisfaction of already having a mass of typed text to work with, before the composition of the first sentence of the paper.

A similar process of transcription should be applied to one's handwritten notes on images. Here, one should respect one's on-site observations as relates to color and other physical aspects of the work, but one is not stuck with every interpretation expressed therein. If one's ideas concerning the art have changed, if they have been inflected by insights or information not available at the time of note-taking, then by all means revise these notes to reflect your new outlook. The end result will be a set of fresh, immediate impressions tempered by a period of thinking and arguing with oneself about the subject. These revised field notes are among the best resources the writer has at her disposal. As a repository of visual thinking, they are at the heart of every form of art writing.

Visual memory is  
deceptive: glance  
frequently at pictures you  
are discussing.

## The Writer's Space

We are practically ready to write—but at this stage, it is again useful to pause, take a deep breath—and look around. Where exactly are we writing? In an office, a library, or a coffee shop? At a desk, on a bed, on the floor? Whatever the circumstances, we must have a certain amount of space at our disposal: space for the computer, for the one (or two) piles of notes, and especially, space for *pictures*.

I cannot emphasize this enough. As we all know from detective films, memory can be deceptive, and more mistakes insinuate themselves into art history through visual memory than through any other channel. And this can always be avoided. Almost a century ago, the connoisseur and scholar of Northern European art Max J. Friedländer observed that art history was once written at the mercy of objects seen years before in faraway lands. Photography, for all the inaccuracies it introduced, made it possible for art writers to look at what they write about *as they write*. We know this, yet we forget too often, subtly doctoring the images in our imaginations to better fit our argument. The end result is visual writing that, far from providing evidence, is tautological. As a remedy, art writers should look at the images they discuss at least once a paragraph, and every time they write a bit of formal analysis, or transcribe into the essay an earlier visual observation. The result will not be a great slowing down of writing activity but rather a great increase in accuracy. One will also get stuck less often.

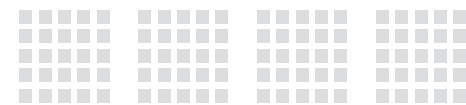
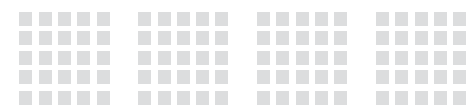
How is this pictorial vigilance to be accomplished practically? Keep all books with relevant images open *at all times*. Mark pictures you cannot keep visible with sticky tabs. If you have pictures stored on the computer, keep these open as well and let them hover behind the text you are typing—it will prevent more than one imaginative blunder.

## Writing

We are down to the wire: real writing, the night before the deadline. Hopefully earlier. In any case: write all at once. This is just an ideal, which necessity might dictate, but, it is also good advice in general. Do stop in a case of emergency or for a mealtime, but *don't* stop for a chat with a friend, a trip to the gym, or just because “the writing is going well.”

This idea of writing as much as possible in one sitting might strike the reader as odd in an academic context: this is supposed to be dispassionate, deliberate writing, not a novelist's outpouring. True, but writing all at once has two great advantages. First of all, in a research paper, you are expected to master and have at your disposal a quantity of outside material (the notes just discussed), not to mention vivid memories of the artwork seen and other thoughts you haven't had a chance to write down. Why risk forgetting ideas whose freshness in your memory is evidence of work already done? To return to a half-written paper is as difficult as returning to a half-written poem. Besides recapturing the mood of the initial writing, you must reacquaint yourself with a universe of discourse—and then you still have to write the rest of it! Better to finish it (not at the last minute) and take the extra time for a second look or to seek outside editing.

The second motive for writing quickly and in one sitting is that in a piece of argumentative writing, the coherence of the thought process is of paramount importance. The novelist, the magnitude of whose task often doesn't permit such coherence, makes a virtue out of necessity: the inconsistencies, returns, and omissions of the novel mirror the thought process as it develops in lived time. A term paper, on the other hand, shouldn't mirror life but rather elaborate one specific idea. As such, having all of one's



writing at hand and fresh in one's memory makes for more coherent, confident academic prose.

Therefore, set aside a full morning or an afternoon—the time of day of writing is not so important, as long as you don't have a firm break ahead (say, lunch plans). The reason not to have firm plans ahead is that getting started often takes a little while, and you won't appreciate being interrupted just when you are really starting to cook. Planning ahead helps, but it's also good to seize the moment: if a stretch of time suddenly opens up, by all means sit down and write.

Once physically ready to write, it helps to get into the right state of mind. I will not prescribe mental exercises to get into this state (as if you needed another thing to do!) but merely point out the symptoms of not being there. One of the difficulties with writing in the computer age is the great variety of distractions at one's fingertips. Many a writer has seen a solemn vow to write turn into an hour of internet surfing, perhaps with a half-hearted thought of “researching things online” as an alibi. If this problem afflicts you regularly, there are countermeasures. Unplug your internet and your phone, close your front door if you are working in a dorm room, or move yourself to the library or some other place of orderly study. If such measures don't work—you find yourself switching the internet back on, chatting with friends, calling your mother—then simply call the writing off, *indulge* your social impulse, your idle curiosity, or what-not. You won't get any less work done, and at the very least, you will be more relaxed and in a better position to write at a later point.

**Titling.** So: you are now sitting in front of your computer, with all your material, and no urge to evade work. You have intelligent music playing in the background—or silence. Where to begin? At the beginning, of course, which for most compositions means a *title*. The title is important, less for the reader than for the writer. It fortifies one and, much like one's own name, it gives the work a sense of identity and purpose. So by all means choose a title if one occurs to you, and write it before beginning your essay. But if a perfect title does not emerge, do not delay. Write *something* in the upper center of the page. You will return to the title later, and most titles, even great ones, change anyhow once the text is completed. Now scroll down: you are ready for the introduction.

**Introduction.** Beginnings in life are tricky, and essays are no different. The literary scholar Edward Said wrote a whole book (his first) about the intellectual implications of how one begins a book. The difficulty in beginning is that the tone (style) and intellectual assumptions (content) you establish will haunt your entire enterprise. Your reader is particularly alert here, and what she learns from you at first will color her perception of your subsequent work. It's as if you had to deliver the whole essay in those first sentences. No wonder we suffer from performance anxiety.

The trick to getting through an introduction—and not spending an inordinate amount of time doing it—is to be aware of its heightened importance, but also to treat it as a convention or exercise. This sounds paradoxical. Be aware of its importance: save that striking sentence you thought up in the shower for the end of the first paragraph, or for the very first line. Or cook up an involving anecdote out of your notes, saving all footnotes until the end of the first paragraph. Or cite a great poem that happens to



fit the theme of your essay. These are all possibilities; and yet they are nothing but pipe dreams when inspiration won't provide the right "interesting opener." Is there a way to force it? That is, can you begin, boldly, without toiling for hours on a great bit of rhetoric that will distract you from the task ahead, and leave you exhausted to boot?

There are two ways of opening that tend to make a good impression and do not require wild burst of creativity: 1) state clearly what the historical problem is, and how you will address it 2) quote an ample passage from a writer who has dealt cogently with your subject, and immediately engage it, suggesting criticisms or extending its ideas. The goal in both cases is to impress the reader with the significance of the topic, and to assure the reader that you are aware of its complexities but have something to contribute to its elucidation. Only beginning writers will claim to solve all problems related to a topic—or else they are so modest that they neglect to mention any problem at all, much less suggest a solution. In contrast, by working to state the problem concisely, you will clarify your own subsequent response. In art history, the problem may be as basic as "what narrative does this painting recount?" though you will get further by also asking *how*.

The alternative, introducing a leading text on the subject and taking issue with its conclusions, fulfills the same basic function. The quoted text states the problem and a preliminary solution to it. Your own comments draw attention to the insufficiency of this solution; or, if you admire the text, you suggest a new way in which it can be applied. One must be careful in quoting here: neither too much (or else you'll exhaust the reader), nor too little (or else the reader won't get the context). A paragraph is about right. One may begin one's essay with the quote as an epigraph, or better yet, one may introduce the citation in one's own words. "On the problem of determining the age of Old Kingdom architecture, archaeologist X has written: ..." Your reader will be treated to a dense, accomplished passage, and, confident that it comes from a venerable source, will be all the more impressed with your own additions or corrections to the established wisdom.

**The Body.** Let's say, in the blur of concentration, you have written your first paragraph. It does not quite please you, nor should it—you will return to it once you have finished the essay. At the moment it is important to press on: and as we have indicated earlier, the possession of a working outline makes the intermediate passages much easier. Do you know what you will say in the next paragraph? It is better to have a plan (I will say "A, B, support B with B1, then proceed to C") than to merely ramble forward from an earlier thought, opening a new paragraph when the previous has grown too long. Such an approach results in lazy, redundant writing.

**The continuous method.** With the outline in view, there are two ways of proceeding through the main body of argument and presenting evidence. The way more commonly pursued consists in simply *telling one's story*, leaving blanks or notes in places where quotes from scholarship, involved visual analyses, or missing facts should be inserted. Such a procedure has the virtue of not interrupting one's train of thought. One simply writes through each main objective of the outline, going on to the next when there is nothing more to say. In situations in which the writing flows easily, this method imposes itself almost unconsciously. Yet it has one serious drawback. The problem is that the bits that you skip—the tedious visual analysis, the involved quote, exact figures—are exactly where the crux of your argument lies, and are likely to be somewhat intractable when you attempt to insert them into your smooth text later. This accords with the principle that your imagination tends to distort texts and pictures to make things easier

Don't claim to solve all problems related to a topic -- or forget to mention any problem at all.

by better fitting one's argument. Naturally, the difficulty sidestepped in misremembering a fact or image return to trouble you when you *do* attempt to deal with it.

**The additive method.** The alternative might seem dry and punctilious, but it has the dryness of a good puzzle. It also works as an 'idea generator' in those situations in which the writing doesn't come naturally. This involves interpolating, according to the outline, *all* or as many as possible of those difficult tidbits—notes on images, important quotes, dates and other statements of fact—into the basic outline, adding only some explanatory notes (type them in a different color or in bold so they'll be easy to remove later) as to how these islands of knowledge connect with your overall argument.

The advantage of this piecemeal approach is twofold. First, you will be heartened by the appearance of quite considerable information where a blank document used to be. The 'argument modules' you inserted work like an embodied outline: they're what you really have to work with in proving your thesis. And because they are not encumbered by connecting prose, you will be able to see with great clarity what difficulties and diversions await you in the next step of writing. You will find that some transitions are simply too jarring (though they looked fine in the more abstract language of the outline), and you will shuffle them about to produce a more logical, more readable sequence.

The second advantage of starting with disparate facts and filling in the argument as you go along is that you will argue with more care and focus, knowing just what facts and images you need to connect. You will not only be sharper in your own paraphrases, knowing *just* what that quote says rather than what you imagined it said, but you will have a cue that the rambler is always lacking: you will know when it's time to stop and confront the next cluster of evidence.

**Arguing.** Whichever way one goes about composing paragraphs, there will come moments when the only way to advance is through considerable feats of *new thinking* and attendant writing. Usually this is due to a logical difficulty encountered in writing. When this happens, it does not mean your outline was not thorough enough. But in thinking through any subject once again, especially when that thinking takes place in writing, new ideas inevitably occur, usually in connection with new difficulties caused by written expression. Arguments are always simpler in outline. The best thing to do in such circumstances is to acknowledge the difficulty of your position as honestly as possible (readers will find this proof of your intelligence, not weakness), and to propose either a solution in accordance with your thesis ("but this unexpected aspect of the painting is *not* inconsistent with Giotto's catholicism...") or else to state clearly that the particular inconsistency still awaits a solution.

What if the difficulty impacts negatively on your thesis? Every argumentative writer has experienced the vertigo of taking a wrong turn and seeming to have to argue the opposite of what she wants overall. As with any case of getting lost, this calls for the making of a decision. Did you read the map incorrectly, or is the map mistaken? That is, is the new, inconsistent observation a weak one, which you should simply remove, or is it correct and does your thesis require correcting? If the second of these is the case, this is no cause for panic. If you see a way to change your thesis entirely to fit the new insight, do so. And if the old thesis seems to work, expect for this odd but true fact? In such a case, you should *qualify* your thesis where the aberrant discussion occurs—if the prior and subsequent discussion continues to hold water, there is no need to rewrite them. The experience is a bit nerve-wracking, but once you have finished the paper, you will be able to take satisfaction in the fact that you had not *one* but *two* ideas about

your subject.

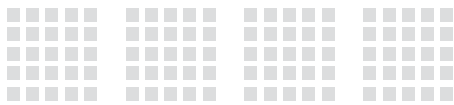
**Concluding.** You have written paragraphs; you have connected facts and analyses with your thesis; you may have even wrangled with your thesis, leaving it bedraggled but more robust; still, when all is said and done, how do you *end*? There is no book on endings. This is understandable since for most people writing is a chore, and ending is simply a relief. Yet the rationale of ending bears some examination. Say you have exhausted your outline. Looking at your text, you may even have proven your thesis, or in our terms, strongly suggested it, stating it fully and offering strong supporting evidence; you can think of nothing left to write. So you end. The problem with the ‘nothing left to say’ approach to ending is that convention demands a final paragraph, which in this case is usually banal in the extreme. The favorite student strategy (teachers are to blame for encouraging this) is to repeat the thesis, changing a few words. The impression created by such an ending is that the writer is *complacent* about his thesis and has confused the end of the paper with the final incontrovertible proof of his argument.

Is there a more intelligent way to end? There are several. In case you had to modify your thesis over the course of the paper, this is the place to state your intellectual transition. “We began by claiming A, but examination of B led us to rethink the claim as C.” This is honorable and will imprint in the reader’s mind the intellectual development in the paper. It will also forestall the objection of inattentive readers that you “contradict yourself.” If no such shift occurs, but your thesis is diffuse or has many parts that are never stated together—this is the place to state it fully and briefly. But if your thesis is clear and has cropped up several times already in your essay, spare your readers the repetition. End with a thoughtful reservation about that thesis, with a suggestion for further work, with a novel insight about your art piece, or, if all else fails, with a joke.

**Editing.** Once you are done writing the body of the text, you will probably polish the work through a ritual I shall refer to as “retitling.” That is, you will first re-examine your title and probably find it awkward or inaccurate. By all means change it now once and for all; a better one won’t occur to you tomorrow. As a part of retitling, you will also cast a critical eye over the written essay, or at least, over the opening paragraphs. I’d like to say one should read the whole essay very critically: this is ideal, but unfortunately hard to do. You already know your argument, and will be hard pressed to regard the whole paper with a skeptical or a fresh eye. But the beginning at least, which you wrote in a rather different frame of mind, will strike you as full of pretensions, wasted verbiage, and claims that you do not pursue in the latter essay. Do not despair and do not delete wholesale. But do make small improvements (the rule of thumb is you should not delete more than you add) that will make your introduction stronger and more reflective of the essay that follows.

If “retitling” the introduction goes well, you may even be in the mood for a thorough rereading and self-edit. If so, continue reading the text on your computer, or print it out, correcting earlier formulations as you see fit. Check other details as well: are the pages numbered, the footnotes in order, the images numbered and captioned? This last step is crucial, if the reader is to critically follow your argument. If you reach the end of the essay again, or give up in disgust, this is the time for a quick mechanical read, checking for typos. Typos are small mistakes but detract from the fiction of professionalism that is the lifeblood of academic writing. Unfortunately, you are so familiar with your text that many typos will slip by you! There is nothing more to be done—you are finished with the writing phase and must show the essay to other people.

Are the pages numbered, the footnotes in order, the images numbered and captioned? This last step is crucial, if the reader is to critically follow your argument.



## Finishing

The detective novelist G.K. Chesterton explained the difference between construction and creation thus: the created object is loved even before it is completed. Applying this logic to our finished essay, we can understand some of the doubt, fear, and embarrassment that attend the making public of this work. But make it public we must.

First, and indispensably, we must have a friend or other able-bodied person *proofread* the manuscript. The author's own proofreading, we repeat, will miss some glaring mistakes. Likewise, the computerized spellchecker will miss certain syntactical errors, such as a mistaken "his" instead of "is." The proofreading friend may also make critical comments, and suggest revisions as her expertise and level of intellectual involvement with the paper allow. Such critical comments should come freely, they cannot be demanded. In turn, if editing suggestions are given, the author ought to give the editor the courtesy of taking them seriously.

Once the text has been looked over by another human being, and provided that the deadline has not already robbed us of it, the best thing the author can do with a finished and edited essay is to...let the text be. The teacher, publisher, or other final destination of the essay will likely have more to say about the prose and ideas. Many students neglect these final comments, which is a shame; but should the essay have a future, in a periodical, say, or in a book, or as an honors thesis, the writer is advised to indulge in a brief textual holiday (read a good novel!), before embarking on the next set of writerly activities, whose pleasures and pitfalls are unfortunately beyond the scope of this book.

# Some Classics of the Discipline

Because of specialization by time period and part of the world, there are few books that *all* art historians read. Below are a few texts that, due to their originality or force, are read widely. Asterisked items are by non-art-historians, but have helped shape the field.

- Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, 1983).
- Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York, 1981).\*
- Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators* (Oxford, 1971).
- André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley, 1967) [Paris, 1958]\*
- Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York, 1968) [1935].\*
- John Boardman, *The Greeks Overseas* (Harmondsworth, 1973).
- Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago, 1994).
- T.J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848-1851* (London, 1973).
- Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing* (Berkeley, 1999).
- Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria* (Cambridge, Mass.: 2003) [Paris, 1982]
- Carol Duncan, "Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in French Art," *Art Bulletin*, Vol.55, No.4 (Dec.1973), 570-583.
- Pierre Francastel, *Art and Technology in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge, Mass.: 2000) [Paris, 1956]
- Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago, 1980).
- Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time, and Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1941).
- Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop Journal*, Vol.9, 1980, 5-36.\*
- E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York, 1960).

references

- Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, 1973).
- Wu Hung, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford, 1995).
- Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avantgarde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985).
- George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, 1962).
- Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (New Haven, 1979).
- Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford, 1977).
- Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, No.3 (Autumn 1975), reprinted in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, 1989).
- Alexander Nemerov, *The Body of Raphaelle Peale* (Berkeley, 2001).
- Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Women, Art, and Power* (New York, 1988) [Art News, 1971].
- Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York, 1991) [1924].
- Alois Riegl, *The Late Roman Art Industry* (Rome, 1985) [Vienna, 1901].
- Meyer Schapiro, "'Cain's Jaw-Bone that Did the First Murder,'" *The Art Bulletin* (September 1942), 205-212.
- Robert Ferris Thompson, *African Art and Motion* (Los Angeles, 1974).
- Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America* (Ithaca, 1995) [1923].



# A Brief Art Glossary

Art history abounds in specialist terms derived from the cultures being studied. To make sense of these, a good general reference, such as *The Grove Dictionary of Art*, is recommended. But there are also terms that are used broadly in art writing, often very differently from everyday usage. (An art historian's illusionism is not a magician's.)

**Abstraction** – a work not representing physical reality (e.g. Rothko) or representing it in a way that is deeply modified by the artist's perception and work process (e.g. Picasso).

**Amateur** – literally "lover": specifically, art-lover. In art writing, this implies a wealthy consumer of art: a patron or collector, rather than an unprofessional or unskilled artist.

**Biomorphic** – a quality evocative of organic forms, animal or vegetal, in visual art. Most often applied to the amoeba-like blobs produced by certain surrealists (e.g. Miró).

**Campaign** – when art takes considerable time to make, art historians use this curious military word to denote specific instances on which work took place: first campaign, etc.

**Canvas** – the customary support for oil painting since the 17th century, as the art market demanded lightness and portability in works of art. Stretched to provide smooth surface.

**Chiaroscuro** – literally "light-dark," describing the shading in an image, regardless of color. Chiaroscuro establishes volume and often some sort of mood (e.g. *Mona Lisa*).

**Composition** – the arrangement of shapes in a visual work; considered crucial (especially by formalist critics and historians) to the overall effect, by giving a sense of motion, stability, unity, dispersal, etc. Often described in geometric terms, e.g. "pyramidal."

**Connoisseur** – literally 'knower,' a collector of exacting taste and sharp eye, who can identify artists on the basis of style. Combining scholarship with elitism, the old cliché of the connoisseur is now in disrepute; but connoisseurship remains a valuable skill set.

**Design** – when discussing visual art, this is like "composition," but refers specifically to the two-dimensional pattern of drawing (draftsmanship, draughtsmanship). When applied to architecture or consumer products, "design" is a more complex term, suggesting such things as the (designer's) plan that was executed in constructing the object or building, or even the rationale behind decisions affecting form and functionality (design decisions).

**Facture** – literally 'making,' in art history the term is used to underline the brute physical processes involved in making art—say, the pouring of hot bronze into a plaster mould.

**Form** – though the term can be imbued with metaphysical import (as in the form/content distinction) art historians often use it more modestly to refer to the visible or perceptible aspects of a work, as opposed to narrative or other culturally determined attributes.

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**Foreshortening** – way of drawing bodies in perspective head-on so that only the front surface is visible. An example would be a foot represented somewhat like this: Ooooo

**Gaze** – in psychoanalytic art writing, this refers to the concentrated visual attention of the spectator (or figures in the work) as carriers of meaning, often sexual in nature.

**Genre** – the conventional types in which Western art was divided: history and religious painting, landscape, portrait, still life. As long as genre boundaries were respected, there was a hierarchy: history was the most prestigious, though audiences didn't always like it. Genre used as an adjective has a different meaning: "genre painting" or "genre scene" is a painting representing everyday life or common people, often very idealized.

**Hand** – though not all art is made "by hand," in art writing this is shorthand for "author." Most often used to describe the input of an unknown collaborator, e.g. a "second hand."

**Handling** – an artist's technique, but not so much the explicit choices (medium, process, etc.— what fits under "facture") as the subtleties of working with a material: one speaks, in intuitive fashion, of "summary handling" or "minute handling," etc.

**Impasto** – the accumulation of paint so it projects three-dimensionally from its support.


**Illusionistic** – imagery meant to fool the eye into perceiving a real object (e.g. a well-modeled teapot) or a real substance not present (e.g. Roman faux-marble).

**Local color** – the color value used to delineate a particular thing (e.g. grass) in a painting, corresponding to its hue in white light (daylight). Often discarded in search of perceptual fidelity (e.g. the Impressionists) or in pursuit of visionary effects (e.g. van Gogh).

**Linear** – A quality of drawing or paint handling (more rarely, of sculptural bodies) that emphasizes contours and enclosed forms rather than bodies with volume and weight.

**Medium** – used to describe general art modes (painting, sculpture), or particular technologies and ways of making art (oil, video, collage). "Media" is always plural.

**Modeling** – when used about persons, it means sitting as a model (for a portrait, nude, etc.). Artists' models, when they were not friends or family members, were often poor women whose subordinate class and sexual status is a given of Western art before the mid-20th century. When used to describe artistic technique, "modeling" means shading.

**Orthogonal** – in math, a right angle: in art history, "orthogonals" are usually colored floor tiles (e.g. in Renaissance painting) that are meant to be square but don't look like they meet at right angles, due to the recession toward a vanishing point. Ex.: 

**Painterly** – German *malerisch*, opposed to "linear" in formalist art history; used to describe a richness of color or paint texture that attracts attention to itself as paint.

**Panel** – or "p. painting," a painting on a wood support, popular in Northern European art.

**Patron** – a buyer or commissioner of work of art, or otherwise monetary supporter of an artist (e.g. Peggy Guggenheim paid Jackson Pollock a monthly stipend to do his work).

**Perspective** – in art writing, usually refers to linear perspective, which organizes an image around a central vanishing point (one-point perspective), with objects becoming systematically smaller the closer they are to the horizon. Also used to describe any system of recession in a painting (e.g. “nonlinear” or “intuitive” perspective).

**Space** – often “pictorial space,” the imaginary three-dimensional realm of illusionistic two-dimensional art. In architecture, real space enclosed or suggested by built forms. “Negative space,” in painting and esp. sculpture, is the void scooped out of a solid form.

**Still life** (plural still lifes; adj.: still-life, as in still-life painter) – genre devoted to the representation of foodstuffs, flowers, everyday objects, or market goods, often with erotic or moralistic undertones (the French term, *nature morte*, recalls the religious theme of the passing of earthly things). Often cats, moths, and other ‘non-still’ elements are included.

**Tactile** – sometimes, “haptic” (Alois Riegl’s term), this refers to the tangible (touchable) characteristics of works of art (texture, grain, etc.) and sometimes, more obscurely, to a sort of empathy that even in visual works awakes muscular reactions in a spectator (say, a jug painted so vividly that one flexes one’s hand as if to grasp it).

**Technique** – an ambiguous term, since it can refer to a medium (e.g. fresco), skill (e.g. ink wash), or an individual’s idiosyncratic approach (e.g. Braque’s collage technique).

**Trompe l’oeil** – French for “fool the eye,” a painting foreshortened to look as if real bodies or space are present beyond the surface. Can be “illusionistic,” but also visionary.

**Volume** – sometimes literally used in sculpture and architecture, volume in painting refers usually to the physical presence suggested of objects modeled in chiaroscuro.

**Wash** – a technique of shading by applying ink diluted with water, resulting in fluid patterns with remarkably fine gradations, strikingly devoid of signs of the artist’s “hand.”

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