

Almost any art history book that you come across will attempt to answer questions posed by the author. For example, in the introduction to *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (1991), Elizabeth Johns writes:

Two simple questions underscore my diagnosis: "Just whose 'everyday life' is depicted?" and "What is the relationship of the actors in this 'everyday life' to the viewers?"

The book contains her answers.

Indeed, as we saw when we quoted Evelyn Welch on page 56, art historians typically ask the questions "How?" "What?" "Why?" and "Who?"—and offer answers.

### A RULE FOR WRITERS:

Generate ideas by asking yourself questions—and in this process do not hesitate to go back over the same ground. Good writing depends on good thinking, and good thinking keeps reexamining its conclusions.

## 4

# FORMAL ANALYSIS AND STYLE

He has found his style when he cannot do otherwise.

—Paul Klee

All art is at once surface and symbol.

—Oscar Wilde

## WHAT FORMAL ANALYSIS IS

The word *formal* in **formal analysis** is not used as the opposite of *informal*, as in a formal dinner or a formal dance. Rather, a formal analysis—the result of *looking* closely—is an analysis of the *form* the artist produces; that is, an analysis of the work of art, which is made up of such things as line, shape, color, texture, mass, composition. These things give the stone or canvas its form, its expression, its content, its meaning. Rudolf Arnheim's assertion that the curves in Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* convey "transmitted, life-giving energy" is a brief example. (See page 50.) Similarly, one might say that a pyramid resting on its base conveys stability, whereas an inverted pyramid—one resting on a point—conveys instability or precariousness. Even if we grant that these forms may not universally carry these meanings, we can perhaps agree that at least in our culture they do. That is, members of a given *interpretive community* perceive certain forms or lines or colors or whatever in a certain way.

Formal analysis assumes a work of art is

1. a constructed object
2. with a stable meaning
3. that can be ascertained by studying the relationships between the elements of the work.

If the elements “cohere,” the work is “meaningful.” That is, the work of art is an independent object that possesses certain properties, and if we think straight, we can examine these properties and can say what the work represents and what it means. The work speaks directly to us, and we understand its language—we respond appropriately to its characteristics (shape, color, texture, and so on), at least if we share the artist’s culture.

Thus, a picture (or any other kind of artwork) is like a chair; a chair *can* be stood on or burned for firewood or used as a weapon, but it was created with a specific purpose that was evident and remains evident to all competent viewers—in this case people who are familiar with chairs. Further, it can be evaluated with reference to its purpose—we can say, for instance, that it is a poor chair because it is uncomfortable and fragile. (In a few moments we will consider opposing views.)

## FORMAL ANALYSIS VERSUS DESCRIPTION

Is the term *formal analysis* merely a pretentious substitute for *description*? Not quite. A **description** is an impersonal inventory, dealing with the relatively obvious, reporting what any eye might see: “A woman in a white dress sits at a table, reading a letter. Behind her . . .” It can also comment on the execution of the work (“thick strokes of paint,” “a highly polished surface”), but it does not offer inferences, and it does not evaluate. A highly detailed description that seeks to bring the image before the reader’s eyes—a kind of writing fairly common in the days before illustrations of artworks were readily available in books—is sometimes called an *ekphrasis* or *ecphrasis* (plural: *ekphraseis*), from the Greek word for “description” (*ek* = out, *phrazein* = tell, declare). Such a description may be set forth in terms that also seek to convey the writer’s emotional response to the work. That is, the description praises the work by seeking to give the reader a sense of being in its presence, especially by commenting on the presumed emotions expressed by the depicted figures. Here is an example: “We recoil with the terrified infant, who averts his eyes from the soldier whose heart is as hard as his burnished armor.”

Writing of this sort is no longer common; a description today is more likely to tell us, for instance, that the head of a certain portrait sculpture “faces front; the upper part of the nose and the rim of the right earlobe are missing. . . . The closely cropped beard and mustache are indicated by short random strokes of the chisel,” and so forth. These statements, from

an entry in the catalog of an exhibition, are all true and they can be useful, but they scarcely reveal the thought, the reflectiveness, that we associate with analysis. When the entry in the catalog goes on, however, to say that “the surfaces below the eyes and cheeks are sensitively modeled to suggest the soft, fleshly forms of age,” we begin to feel that now indeed we are reading not merely a description but an analysis, because here the writer is arguing a thesis.

Similarly, although the statement that “the surface is in excellent condition” is purely descriptive (despite the apparent value judgment in “excellent”), the statement that the “dominating block form” of the portrait contributes to “the impression of frozen tension” can reasonably be called analytic. One reason we can characterize this statement as analytic (rather than descriptive) is that it offers an argument, in this instance an argument concerned with cause and effect: The dominating block form, the writer argues, produces an effect—*causes* us to perceive a condition of frozen tension.

Much of any formal analysis will inevitably consist of description (“The pupils of the eyes are turned upward”), and accurate descriptive writing itself requires careful observation of the object and careful use of words. But an essay is a formal analysis rather than a description only if it connects effects with causes, thereby showing *how* the described object works. For example, “The pupils of the eyes are turned upward” is a description, but the following revision is an analytic statement: “The pupils of the eyes are turned upward, suggesting a heaven-fixed gaze, or, more bluntly, suggesting that the figure is divinely inspired.”

When one writes a formal analysis one takes a “look under the hood,” in the words of Professor Rosalind Krauss. Another way of putting it is to say that analysis tries to answer the somewhat odd-sounding question, “*How* does the work mean?” Thus, the following paragraph, because it is concerned with *how* form makes meaning, is chiefly analytic rather than descriptive. The author has made the point that a Protestant church emphasizes neither the altar nor the pulpit; “as befits the universal priesthood of all believers,” he says, a Protestant church is essentially an auditorium. He then goes on to analyze the ways in which a Gothic cathedral says or means something very different:

The focus of the space on the interior of a Gothic cathedral is . . . compulsive and unrelievedly concentrated. It falls, and falls exclusively, upon the sacrifice that is re-enacted by the mediating act of priest

before the altar-table. So therefore, by design, the first light that strikes the eye, as one enters the cathedral, is the jeweled glow of the lancets in the apse, before which the altar-table stands. The pulsating rhythm of the arches in the nave arcade moves toward it; the string-course moldings converge in perspective recession upon it. Above, the groins of the apse radiate from it; the ribshafts which receive them and descend to the floor below return the eye inevitably to it. It is the single part of a Gothic space in which definiteness is certified. In any other place, for any part which the eye may reach, there is always an indefinite beyond, which remains to be explored. Here there is none. The altar-table is the common center in which all movement comes voluntarily to rest.

—John F. A. Taylor, *Design and Expression in the Visual Arts*  
(New York: Dover, 1964), 115–117

In this passage the writer is telling us, analytically, *how* the cathedral means.

### Opposition to Formal Analysis

Formal analysis, we have seen, assumes that artists shape their materials so that a work of art embodies a particular meaning and evokes a pleasurable response in the spectator. The viewer today does not try to see the historical object with “period” eyes but, rather, sees it with an aesthetic attitude. The purpose of formal analysis is to show *how* intended meanings are communicated in an aesthetic object.

Since about 1970, however, these assumptions have been strongly called into question. There has been a marked shift of interest from the work as a thing whose meaning is contained within itself—a decontextualized object—to a thing whose meaning partly, largely, or even entirely consists of its context, its relation to things outside of itself (for instance, the institutions or individuals for whom the work was produced), especially its relationship to the person who perceives it.

Further, there has been a shift from viewing an artwork as a thing of value in itself—or as an object that provides pleasure and that conveys some sort of profound and perhaps universal meaning—to viewing the artwork as an object that reveals the power structure of a society. The work is brought down to earth, so to speak, and is said thereby to be “demystified.” Thus the student does not look for a presumed unified whole. On the contrary, the student “deconstructs” the work by looking

for “fissures” and “slippages” that give away—reveal, unmask—the underlying political and social realities that the artist sought to cover up with sensuous appeal.

A discussion of an early nineteenth-century idyllic landscape painting, for instance, today might call attention not to the elegant brushwork and the color harmonies (which earlier might have been regarded as sources of aesthetic pleasure), or even to the neat hedges and meandering streams (meant to evoke pleasing sensations), but to such social or psychological matters as the painter’s unwillingness to depict the hardships of rural life and the cruel economic realities of land ownership in an age when poor families could be driven from their homes at the whim of a rich landowner. Such a discussion might even argue that the picture, by means of its visual seductiveness, seeks to legitimize social inequities. (We will return to the matters of demystification and deconstruction in Chapter 10, when we look at the social historian’s approach to artworks, on pages 222–25.)

We can grant that works of art are partly shaped by social and political forces (these are the subjects of historical and political approaches, discussed in Chapter 10); and we can grant that works of art are partly shaped by the artist’s personality (the subject of psychoanalytical approaches, also discussed in Chapter 10). But this is only to say that works of art can be studied from several points of view; it does not invalidate the view that these works are also, at least in part, shaped by conscious intentions, and that the shapes or constructions that the artists (consciously or not) have produced convey a meaning.

### STYLE AS THE SHAPER OF FORM

It is now time to define the elusive word **style**. The first thing to say is that the word is *not* used by most art historians to convey praise, as in “He has style.” Rather, it is used neutrally, for everyone and everything made has a style—good, bad, or indifferent. The person who, as we say, “talks like a book” has a style (probably an annoying one), and the person who keeps saying, “Uh, you know what I mean” has a style too (different, but equally annoying).

Similarly, whether we wear jeans or painter’s pants or gray flannel slacks, we have a style in our dress. We may claim to wear any old thing, but in fact we don’t; there are clothes we wouldn’t be caught dead in. The clothes we wear are expressive; they announce that we are police officers

or bankers or tourists or college students—or at least they show what we want to be thought to be, as when in the 1960s many young middle-class students wore tattered clothing, thus showing their allegiance to the poor and their enmity toward what was called the Establishment. It is not silly to think of our clothing as a sort of art that we make. Once we go beyond clothing as something that merely serves the needs of modesty and that provides protection against heat and cold and rain, we get clothing whose style is expressive.

To turn now to our central topic—style in art—we can all instantly tell the difference between a picture by van Gogh and one by Norman Rockwell or Walt Disney, even though the subject matter of all three pictures may be the same (e.g., a seated woman). How can we tell? By the style—that is, by line, color, medium, and all of the other things we talked about earlier in this chapter. Walt Disney's figures tend to be built up out of circles and ovals (think of Mickey Mouse), and the color shows no modeling or traces of brush strokes; Norman Rockwell's methods of depicting figures are different, and van Gogh's are different in yet other ways. Similarly, a Chinese landscape, painted with ink on silk or on paper, simply cannot look like a van Gogh landscape done with oil paint on canvas, partly because the materials prohibit such identity and partly because the Chinese painter's vision of landscape (usually lofty mountains) is not van Gogh's vision. Their works "say" different things. As the poet Wallace Stevens put it, "A change of style is a change of subject."

We recognize certain *distinguishing characteristics* (from large matters, such as choice of subject and composition, to small matters, such as kinds of brush strokes) that mark an artist, or a period, or a culture, and these constitute the style. Almost anyone can distinguish between a landscape painted by a traditional Chinese artist and one painted by van Gogh. But it takes considerable familiarity with van Gogh to be able to say of a work, "Probably 1888 or maybe 1889," just as it takes considerable familiarity with the styles of Chinese painters to be able to say, "This is a Chinese painting of the seventeenth century, in fact the late seventeenth century. It belongs to the Nanking School and is a work by Kung Hsien—not by a follower, and certainly not a copy, but the genuine article."

Style, then, is revealed in **form**; an artist creates form by applying certain techniques to certain materials, in order to embody a particular vision or content. In different ages people have seen things differently: the nude body as splendid, or the nude body as shameful; Jesus as majestic ruler, or Jesus as the sufferer on the cross; landscape as pleasant, domesticated countryside, or landscape as wild nature. So the chosen subject matter is

not only part of the content but is also part of that assemblage of distinguishing characteristics that constitutes a style.

All of the elements of style, finally, are expressive. Take ceramics as an example. The kind of clay, the degree of heat at which it is baked, the decoration or glaze (if any), the shape of the vessel, the thickness of its wall, all are elements of the potter's style, and all contribute to the expressive form. But not every expressive form is available in every age; certain visions, and certain technologies, are, in certain ages, unavailable. Porcelain, as opposed to pottery, requires a particular kind of clay and an extremely high temperature in the kiln, and these were simply not available to the earliest Japanese potters. Even the potter's wheel was not available to them; they built their pots by coiling ropes of clay and then, sometimes, they smoothed the surface with a spatula. The result is a kind of thick-walled, low-fired ceramic that expresses energy and earthiness, far different from those delicate Chinese porcelains that express courtliness and the power of technology (or, we might say, of art).

## SAMPLE ESSAY: A FORMAL ANALYSIS

The following sample essay, written by an undergraduate, includes a good deal of description (a formal analysis usually begins with a fairly full description of the artwork), and the essay is conspicuously impersonal (another characteristic of a formal analysis). But notice that even this apparently dispassionate assertion of facts is shaped by a **thesis**. If we stand back from the essay, we can see that the basic point or argument is this: The sculpture successfully combines a highly conventional symmetrical style, on the one hand, with mild asymmetry and a degree of realism, on the other.

Put thus, the thesis does not sound especially interesting, but that is because the statement is highly abstract, lacking in concrete detail. A writer's job is to take that idea (thesis) and to present it in an interesting and convincing way. In drafting and revising an essay, good writers keep thinking, "I want my readers to see. . . ." The idea will come alive for the reader when the writer supports it by calling attention to specific details—the evidence—as the student writer does in the following essay.

Notice, by the way, that in his first sentence the student refers to "Figure 1," which is a photograph of the work he discusses. (The images in an essay or book are called figures, and they are numbered consecutively.)

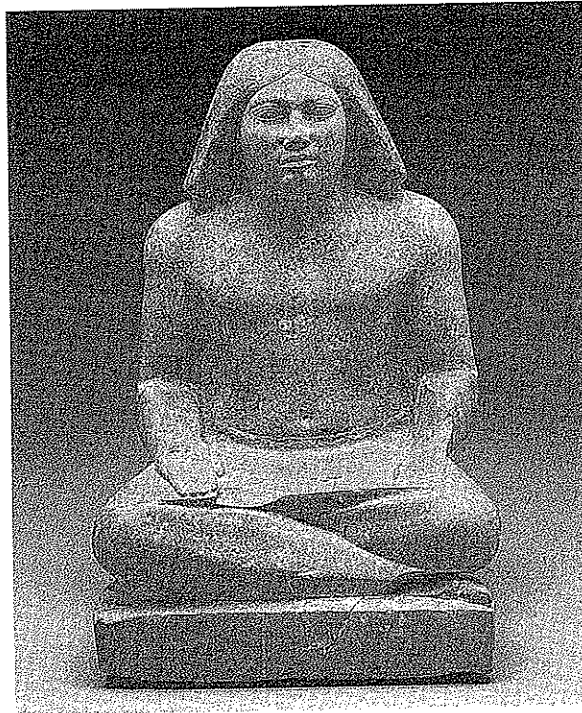


Figure 1. Seated Statue of Prince Khunera as a Scribe. Egyptian, Old Kingdom, Dynasty 4, reign of Menkaure, 2490–2472 B.C. Object Place: Notes: Egypt (Giza, Menkaure Cemetery, MQ1). Limestone, Height  $\times$  width  $\times$  depth: 30.5  $\times$  21.5  $\times$  16 cm (12  $\times$  8  $\frac{5}{16}$   $\times$  6  $\frac{3}{16}$  in.) Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition, 13.3140.

This illustration originally appeared on a separate page at the end of the paper, but here it has been put before the essay.

Stephen Beer

Fine Arts 10A

September 10, 2006

#### Formal Analysis: *Prince Khunera as a Scribe*

*Prince Khunera as a Scribe*, a free-standing Egyptian sculpture 12 inches tall, now in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (Figure 1), was found at Giza in a temple dedicated to the father of the prince, King Mycerinus. The limestone statue may have been a tribute to that Fourth Dynasty king.<sup>1</sup> The prince, sitting cross-legged with a

<sup>1</sup>Museum label.

scribal tablet on his lap, rests his hands on his thighs. He wears only a short skirt or kilt.

The statue is in excellent condition although it is missing its right forearm and hand. Fragments of the left leg and the scribe's tablet also have been lost. The lack of any difference in the carving between the bare stomach and the kilt suggests that these two features were once differentiated by contrasting paint that has now faded, but the only traces of paint remaining on the figure are bits of black on the hair and eyes.

The statue is symmetrical, composed along a vertical axis which runs from the crown of the head into the base of the sculpture. The sculptor has relied on basic geometric forms in shaping the statue on either side of this axis. Thus, the piece could be described as a circle (the head) within a triangle (the wig) which sits atop a square and two rectangles (the torso, the crossed legs, and the base). The reliance on basic geometric forms reveals itself even in details. For example, the forehead is depicted as a small triangle within the larger triangular form of the headdress.

On closer inspection, however, one observes that the rigidity of both this geometric and symmetric organization is relieved by the artist's sensitivity to detail and by his ability as a sculptor. None of the shapes of the work is a true geometric form. The full, rounded face is more of an oval than a circle, but actually it is neither. The silhouette of the upper part of the body is defined by softly undulating lines that represent the muscles of the arms and that modify the simplicity of a strictly square shape. Where the prince's naked torso meets his kilt, just below the waist, the sculptor has suggested portliness by allowing the form of the stomach to swell slightly. Even the "circular" navel is flattened into an irregular shape by the suggested weight of the body. The contours

of the base, a simple matter at first glance, actually are not exactly four-square but rather are slightly curvilinear. Nor is the symmetry on either side of the vertical axis perfect: Both the mouth and the nose are slightly askew; the right and left forearms originally struck different poses; and the left leg is given prominence over the right. These departures from symmetry and from geometry enliven the statue, giving it both an individuality and a personality.

Although most of the statue is carved in broad planes, the sculptor has paid particular attention to details in the head. There he attempted to represent realistically the details of the prince's face. The parts of the eyes, for example—the eyebrows, eyelids, eyeballs, and sockets—are distinct. Elsewhere the artist has not worked in such probing detail. The breasts, for instance, are rendered in large forms, the nipples being absent. The attention to the details of the face suggests that the artist attempted to render a life-likeness of the prince himself.

The prince is represented in a scribe's pose but without a scribe's tools. The prince is not actually *doing* anything. He merely sits. The absence of any open spaces (between the elbows and the waist) contributes to the figure's composure or self-containment. But if he sits, he sits attentively: There is nothing static here. The slight upward tilt of the head and the suggestion of an upward gaze of the eyes give the impression that the alert prince is attending someone else, perhaps his father the king. The suggestion in the statue is one of imminent work rather than of work in process.

Thus, the statue, with its variations from geometric order, suggests the presence, in stone, of a particular man. The pose may be standard and the outer form may appear rigid at first, yet the sculptor has managed to depict an individual. The details of the face and the overfleshed belly reveal an intent to portray a person, not just

an idealized member of the scribal profession. Surely when freshly painted these elements of individuality within the confines of conventional forms and geometric structure were even more compelling.

### Behind the Scene: Beer's Essay, from Early Responses to Final Version

This essay is good because it is clear and interesting and especially because it helps the reader to see and enjoy the work of art. Now let's go backstage, so to speak, to see how Stephen Beer turned his notes into an effective final draft.

**Beer's Earliest Responses.** After studying the object and reading the museum label, Beer jotted down ideas in the Notebook application from Circus Ponies Software, although he could just as easily have used several other applications (see page 126 for a list of software that may be useful). What historical information does the label provide? (Beer recorded the material on a page for that object.) Can the sculpture be called realistic? Yes and no. (Beer put his responses, in words, on another notebook page.) What is the condition of the piece? (Again he put his responses in their own notebook pages.) A day later, when he returned to work on his paper, stimulated by another look at the artwork and by a review of his notes, Beer made additional jottings.

**Organizing Notes.** When the time came to turn the notes into a draft and the revised draft into an essay, Beer reviewed the notes and he added further thoughts. Next, he organized the note pages, putting together into one section whatever pages he had about (for instance) realism, and putting together, into another section, whatever note pages he had about (again, for instance) background material. Reviewing the notes in each section, and on the basis of the review (after making a backup copy), deleting a few pages that no longer seemed useful, as well as moving an occasional page into a different section (via the Contents view), Beer started to think about how he might organize his essay.

As a first step in settling on an organization, he arranged the notebook sections into a sequence that seemed reasonable to him. It made sense, he thought, to begin with some historical background and a brief description, then to touch on Egyptian sculpture in general (but he soon decided *not* to include this general material), then to go on to some large points about the particular piece, then to refine some of

these points, and finally to offer some sort of conclusion. This organization, he felt, was reasonable and would enable his reader to follow his argument easily.

**Preparing a Preliminary Outline.** In order to get a clearer idea of where he might be going, Beer then typed an outline—the gist of what at this stage seemed to be the organization of his chief points (see page 125) in the OmniOutliner(Omni Group), although he could just as easily have used the Outline view in Microsoft Word. In short, he prepared a map or rough outline so that he could easily see, almost at a glance, if each part of his paper would lead coherently to the next part.

In surveying his outline, Beer became aware of points that he should have included but that he had overlooked.

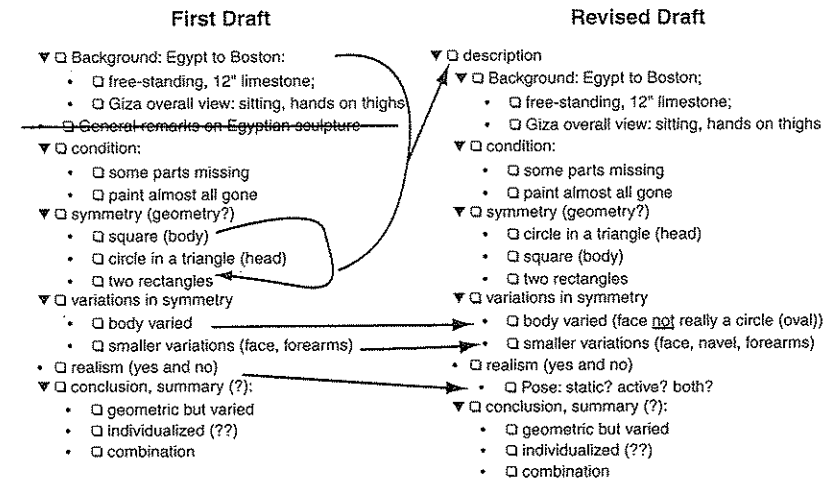
A tentative outline, after all, is not a straitjacket that determines the shape of the final essay. To the contrary, it is a preliminary map that, when examined, helps the writer to see not only pointless detours—these will be eliminated in the draft—but also undeveloped areas that need to be worked up. As the two versions of Beer's outline indicate, after drafting his map he made some important changes before writing a first draft.

**Writing a Draft.** Working from his thoughtfully revised outline, Beer wrote a first draft, which he then revised into a second draft. The second draft, when further revised, became the final essay. Modern word-processing programs, such as Microsoft Word, allow you to track the revisions made to a document and look at different versions of a document. However, many writers find comfort in having a printed copy of each draft to go over with a pen; the desired changes can then be made (and kept track of) on the computer.

The word *draft*, by the way, comes from the same Old English root that gives us *draw*. When you draft an essay, you are making a sketch, putting on paper (or screen) a sketch or plan that you will later refine.

**Outlining a Draft.** A good way to test the coherence of a final draft—to see if indeed it qualifies as an essay rather than as a draft—is to outline it, paragraph by paragraph, in *two* ways, indicating

- (a) what each paragraph *says*
- (b) what each paragraph *does*



Here is a double outline of this sort for Beer's seven-paragraph essay. In (a) we get a brief summary of what Beer is *saying* in each paragraph, and in (b) we get, in the italicized words, a description of what he is *doing* in the paragraph.

1. a. Historical background and brief description  
b. *Introduces* the artwork
2. a. The condition of the artwork  
b. *Provides further overall description, preparatory* to the analysis
3. a. The geometry of the work  
b. *Introduces the thesis*, concerning the basic, overall geometry
4. a. Significant details  
b. *Modifies (refines) the argument*
5. a. The head  
b. *Compares* the realism of head with the breasts, in order to make the point that the head is more detailed
6. a. The pose  
b. *Argues* that the pose is not static
7. a. Geometric, yet individual  
b. *Concludes, largely by summarizing*



Some Useful Software Programs for Writers

Name	Publisher	Platforms	Notes
Circus Ponies Notebook	Circus Ponies Software	Mac OS X	Keyword-organized note pages in multiple sections; built-in outlining
NoteTaker	AquaMinds	Mac OS X	Keyword-organized note pages, built-in outlining
WhizFolders	WhizFolders	Windows 98, XP, 2000	Note organizer and outliner; bibliographic organization features
Organizer Pro			
OmniOutliner	Omni Group	Mac OS X	Powerful outlining features with some free-form note capabilities
KeyNote	Tranglos	Windows 95 and later	Free, outlining and note-taking
Microsoft Word	Microsoft Corp.	Windows, Mac OS X	Word processor also has both notebook (including drawing) and outline views
EndNote	Thomson	Windows Mac OS X, Mac OS X	Bibliographic database, interfaces with Word, tracks citations, can search online references
Sente	Third Street Software	Mac OS X	Bibliographic database, interfaces with Word and Mellel, tracks citations, can search online references
Inspiration	Inspiration Software, Inc.	Windows, Mac OS X, Mac OS Classic, Handhelds	Project and note organization, flow charts
iLiner	Mercury Software	Mac OS X	Document summarization, organization, brainstorming, outlining
Ulysses	The Blue Technologies Group	Mac OS X	Writer's word processor, organizes notes, chapters, documents
CopyWrite	Bartas Technologies	Mac OS X	Writer's word processor, organizes notes, chapters, documents. Free for small projects

## A RULE FOR WRITERS:

You may or may not want to sketch a rough outline before drafting your essay, but you certainly should outline what you hope is your final draft, to see (a) if it is organized, and (b) if the organization will be evident to the reader.

An outline of this sort, in which you force yourself to consider not only the content but also the function of each paragraph, will help you to see if your essay (a) says something and (b) says it with the help of an effective structure. If the structure is sound, your argument will flow nicely.

## POSTSCRIPT: THOUGHTS ABOUT THE WORDS "REALISTIC" AND "IDEALIZED"

In his fifth paragraph (page 122) Beers uses the word "realistically," and in his final paragraph he uses "idealized." These words, common in essays on art, deserve comment. Let's begin a bit indirectly. Aristotle (384–322 BC) says that the arts originate in two basic human impulses, the impulse to imitate (from the Greek word *mimesis*, imitation) and the impulse to create patterns or harmony. In small children we find both (1) the impulse to imitate in their mimicry of others and (2) the impulse to harmony in their fondness for rocking and for strongly rhythmic nursery rhymes. Most works of art, as we shall see, combine imitation (mimicry, a representation of what the eye sees, realism) with harmony (an overriding form or pattern produced by a shaping idea). "We can imagine," Kenneth Clark wrote, "that the early sculptor who found the features of a head conforming to an ovoid, or the body conforming to a column, had a deep satisfaction. Now it looks as if it would last" (Introduction to *Masterpieces of Fifty Centuries*, 1970, page 15). In short, artists have eyes, but they also have ideas about basic patterns that underlie the varied phenomena around us.

For an extreme example of a body simplified to a column—a body shaped by the *idea* that a body conforms to a column—we can look at Constantin Brancusi's *Torso of a Young Man* (1924). Here the artist's idea has clearly dominated his eye; we can say that this body is **idealized**.



Looking at this work, we are not surprised to learn that Brancusi said he was concerned with the "eternal type [i.e., the prototype] of ephemeral forms," and that "What is real is not the external form, but the essence of things. . . . It is impossible for anyone to express anything essentially real by imitating its exterior surface." The real or essential form represented in this instance is both the young man of the title and also the phallus.

The idea underlying works that are said to be idealized usually is the idea of beauty. Thus, tradition says that Raphael, seeking a model

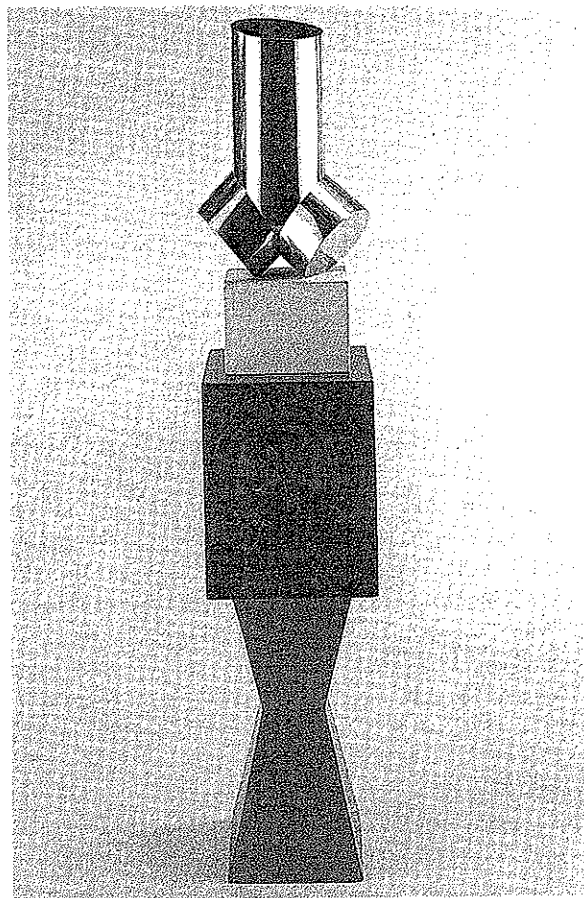


Figure 2. Constantin Brancusi, *Torso of a Young Man*, 1924. Polished brass, 18"; with original wood base, 58 1/2". Photographer: Lee Stalsworth. The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966.

for the beautiful mythological Galatea, could not find one model who was in all respects beautiful enough, so he had to draw on several women (the lips of one, the hair of another, and so on) in order to paint an image that expressed the ideally beautiful woman. Examples of idealized images of male beauty are provided by many portrait heads of Antinous (also Antinoös), the youth beloved by the Roman emperor Hadrian. Writing in the *Bulletin* of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Elizabeth J. Milleker calls attention to the combination of "actual features of the boy" and "an idealized image" in such a head (see the head of Antinoos on this page):

This head is a good example of the sophisticated portrait type created by imperial sculptors to incorporate what must have been actual features of the boy in an idealized image that conveys a godlike beauty. The ovoid face with a straight brow, almond-shaped eyes, smooth cheeks, and fleshy lips is surrounded by abundant tousled curls. The ivy wreath encircling his head associates him with Dionysos, a guarantor of renewal and good fortune.

—Metropolitan Museum of Art *Bulletin* (Fall 1997): 15

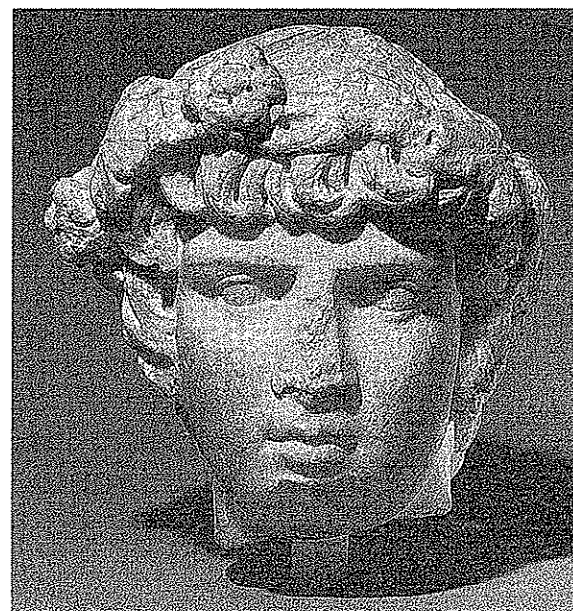


Figure 3. Roman, *Portrait Head of Antinoos*, AD 130–38. Marble, 9 3/4". The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Bronson Pinchot in recognition of his mother, Rosina Asta Pinchot, 1996. (1996.401).

**Realism** has at least two meanings in writings about art: (1) a movement in mid-nineteenth-century Western Europe and America, which emphasized the everyday subjects of ordinary life, as opposed to subjects drawn from mythology, history, and upper-class experience; and (2) fidelity to appearances, the accurate rendition of the surfaces of people, places, and things. In our discussion of realism, we will be concerned only with the second definition. *Naturalism* is often used as a synonym for *realism*; thus, a work that reproduces surfaces may be said to be realistic, naturalistic, or illusionistic; *veristic* is also used, but less commonly. The most extreme form of realism is *trompe-l'oeil* (French: deceives the eye), complete illusionism—the painted fly on the picture frame, the waxwork museum guard standing in a doorway, images created with the purpose of deceiving the viewer. But of course most images are not the exact size of the model, so even if they are realistically rendered, they do not deceive. When we look at most images, we are aware that we are looking not at reality (a fly, a human being) but at the product of the artist's gaze at such real things. Further, the medium itself may prohibit illusionism; an unpainted stone or bronze head, however accurate in its representation of cheekbones, hair, the shape of the nose, and so forth, cannot be taken for Abraham Lincoln.

**Idealism**, like realism, has at least two meanings in art: (1) the belief that a work conveys an idea as well as appearances and (2) the belief—derived partly from the first meaning—that it should convey an idea that elevates the thoughts of the spectator, and it does this by presenting an image, let's say of heroism or of motherhood, loftier than any real object that we can see in the imperfect world around us. (Do not confuse *idealism* as it is used in art with its everyday meaning, as in “despite her years, she retained her idealism,” where the word means “noble goals.”) The story of Raphael's quest for a model for Galatea (mentioned on pages 128–29) is relevant here, and somewhat similarly, the Hadrianic sculptors who made images of Antinous, as the writer in the Metropolitan Museum's *Bulletin* said, must have had in mind not a particular youth but the idea of “godlike beauty.”

By way of contrast, consider Sir Peter Lely's encounter with Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658), the English general and statesman. Cromwell is reported to have said to the painter, “Mr. Lely, I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but remark [i.e., take notice of] all these roughnesses, pimples, warts, and everything as you see me.” Cromwell was asking for a realistic (or naturalistic, or veristic) portrait, not an idealized portrait like the sculpture of Antinous. What would an idealized portrait look like? It would omit the

blemishes. Why? Because the blemishes would be thought to be mere trivial surface details that would get between the viewer and the artist's *idea* of Cromwell, Cromwell's essence as the artist perceives it—for instance, the nobility that characterized his statesmanship and leadership. What distinguishes the idealizing artist from the ordinary person, it is said, is the artist's imaginative ability to penetrate the visible (the surface) and set forth an elevating ideal.

In short, *realism* is defined as the representation of visual phenomena as exactly—as realistically—as the medium (stone, bronze, paint on paper or canvas) allows. At the other extreme from illusionism we have idealism, for instance, in the representation of the torso of a young man by a column. A realistic portrait of Cromwell will show him as he appears to the eye, warts and all; an idealized portrait will give us the idea of Cromwell by, so to speak, airbrushing the warts, giving him some extra stature, slimming him down a bit, giving him perhaps a more thoughtful face than he had, setting him in a pyramidal composition to emphasize his stability, thereby stimulating our minds to perceive the nobility of his cause.

Both realism and idealism have had their advocates. As a spokesperson for realism we can take Leonardo, who in his *Notebooks* says that “the mind of the painter should be like a looking-glass that is filled with as many images as there are objects before him.” Against this view we can take a remark by a contemporary painter, Larry Rivers: “I am not interested in the art of holding up mirrors.” Probably most artists offer the Aristotelian combination of imitation and harmony. The apparently realistic (primarily mimetic) artist is concerned at least in some degree with a pattern or form that helps to order the work and to give it meaning, and the apparently idealistic artist—even the nonobjective artist who might seem to deal only in harmonious shapes and colors—is concerned with connecting the work to the world we live in, for instance, to our emotions. An artist might deliberately depart from surface realism—mimetic accuracy—in order to “defamiliarize” or “estrangle” our customary perceptions, slowing us down or shaking us up, so to speak, in order to jostle us out of our stock responses, thereby letting us see reality freshly. Although this idea is especially associated with the Russian Formalist school of the early twentieth century, it can be traced back to the early-nineteenth-century Romantic writers. For instance, Samuel Taylor Coleridge praised the poetry of William Wordsworth because, in Coleridge's words, it removed “the film of familiarity” that clouded our usual vision.

Somewhere near the middle of the spectrum, between artists who offer highly mimetic representations and at the other extreme those who

offer representations that bear little resemblance to what we see, we have the sculptor, hypothesized by Kenneth Clark, who saw the head as an ovoid and said to himself, "Now it looks as if it would last." Here the "idea" that shapes the features of the head (for instance, bringing the ears closer to the skull) is the idea of perfection and endurance, stability, even eternity, and surely some such thoughts cross our minds when we perceive works that we love. One might almost write a history of art in terms of the changing proportions of realism and idealism during the lifetime of a culture.

### A RULE FOR WRITERS:

There is nothing wrong with using the words *realistic* and *idealized* in your essay, but keep in mind that it is not a matter of all-or-nothing; there are degrees of realism and degrees of idealization.

It is easy to find remarks by artists setting forth a middle view. In an exhibition catalog (1948), Henri Matisse said, "There is an inherent truth which must be disengaged from the outward appearances of the object to be represented. . . . Exactitude is not truth." And most works of art are neither purely realistic (concerned only with "exactitude," realistic description) nor purely idealistic (concerned only with "an inherent truth"). Again we think of Aristotle's combination of the impulse to imitate and the impulse to create harmony. We might think, too, of a comment by Picasso: "If you want to draw, you must first shut your eyes and sing."

We can probably agree that *Prince Khunera as a Scribe* (page 120) shows a good deal of idealism, but it also shows realistic touches. Stephen Beer's analysis calls attention to its idealized quality, in its symmetry and its nearly circular head, but he also says that the eye is rendered with "descriptive accuracy." Or look at Michelangelo's *David* (page 49). It is realistic in its depiction of the veins in David's hands, but it is idealized in its color (not flesh color but white to suggest purity), in its size (much larger than life, to convey the ideal of heroism), and in its nudity. Surely Michelangelo did not think David went into battle naked, so why is his David nude? Because Michelangelo, carving the statue in part to commemorate the civic constitution of the Florentine republic, wanted to convey the ideas of justice and of classical heroism, and classical sculptures of heroes were nude. We can, then, talk about Michelangelo's idealism, and—still talking of the same image—we can talk about his realism.

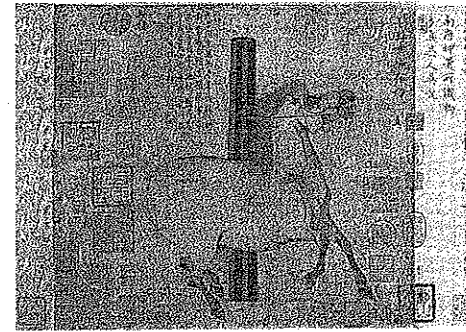


Figure 4. Chinese paintings. *Night-Shining White*, Tang Dynasty (618?907), 8th century. Attributed to Han Gan (Chinese, act. 742?756?) China Handscroll; ink on paper;  $12 \frac{1}{8} \times 13 \frac{3}{8}$  in. (30.8 × 34 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Purchase, The Dillon Fund, 1977 (1977.78). Photographer: Malcolm Varon. 1990.

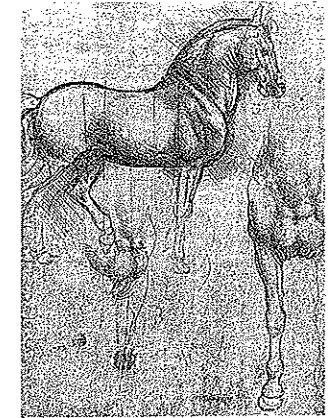


Figure 5. Leonardo Da Vinci, *A Horse in Profile to the Right, and its Forelegs*, c. 1490. Silverpoint on blue prepared surface,  $8 \frac{1}{2} \times 6 \frac{3}{8}$ ". The Royal Collection © 2006 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Consider the three pictures of horses shown on pages 133–34. Han Gan's painting (upper left) is less concerned with accurately rendering the appearance of a horse than with rendering its great inner spirit, hence the head and neck that are too large for the body, and the body that is too large for the legs. The legs, though in motion to show the horse's grace and liveliness, are diminished because the essence of the horse is the strength of its body, communicated partly by juxtaposing the arcs of its rump and its (unreal) electrified mane with the stolid hitching post. In brief, the painting shows what we in the West probably would call an idealized horse, although the Chinese might say that by revealing the spirit the picture captures the "real" horse. (It once had a tail, but the tail has been largely eroded by wear, and the vestiges have been obscured by an owner's seal.)

Leonardo's drawing (upper right) is largely concerned with anatomical correctness, and we can call it realistic. Still, by posing the horse in profile, Leonardo calls attention to the animal's geometry, notably the curves of the neck, chest, and rump, and despite the accurate detail the picture seems to represent not a particular horse but the essential idea of a horse. (Doubtless the blank background and the absence of a groundplane here, as in the Chinese painting, contribute to this impression of idealizing.)

George Stubbs's painting of Hambletonian (bottom), who had recently won an important race, surely is an accurate representation of a particular horse, but even here we can note an idealizing element: Stubbs emphasizes the animal's heroic stature by spreading its image across the canvas so that the horse dwarfs the human beings and the buildings.

If your instructor asks you to compare two works—perhaps an Egyptian ruler and a Greek athlete, or an Indian Buddha and a Chinese Buddha—you may well find one of them more realistic than the other, but remember, even a highly realistic work may include idealized elements, and an idealized work may include realistic elements.

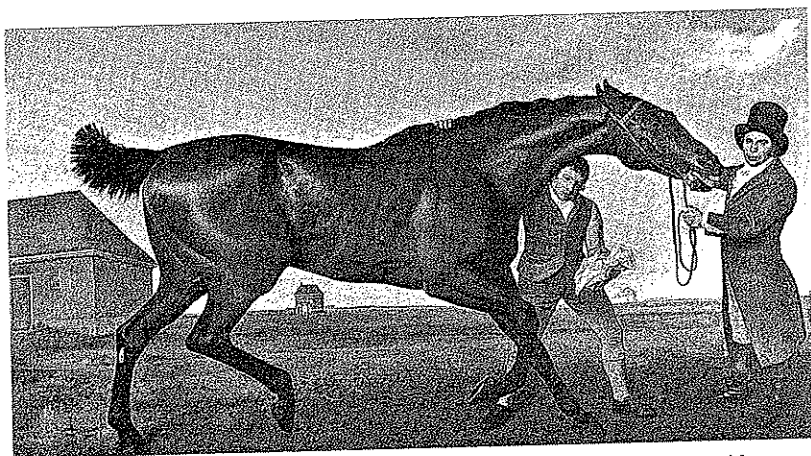


Figure 6. Great Britain, County Down, Mount Stewart House & Garden—*Hambletonian* by George Stubbs © 1800. Oil on canvas 82 1/2" × 144 3/4". Photographer: NTPL. The Image Works.

## 5

## WRITING A COMPARISON

If you really want to see something, look at something else.

—Howard Nemerov

Everything is what it is and not another thing.

—Bishop Joseph Butler

### COMPARING AS A WAY OF DISCOVERING

Analysis frequently involves comparing: Things are examined for their resemblances to and differences from other things. Strictly speaking, if one emphasizes the differences rather than the similarities, one is contrasting rather than comparing, but we need not preserve this distinction; we can call both processes *comparing*.

Although your instructor may ask you to write a comparison of two works of art, the *subject* of the essay is the *works*, or, more precisely, the subject is the thesis you are advancing; for example, that one work is later than the other or is more successful. Comparison is simply an effective analytical *technique* to show some of the qualities of the works. We usually can get a clearer idea of what X is when we compare it to Y—provided that Y is at least somewhat like X. Comparing, in short, is a way of discovering, a way of learning, and ultimately a way of helping your reader to see things your way.

In the words of Howard Nemerov, quoted at the top of this page, "If you really want to see something, look at something else." But the "something else" can't be any old thing. It has to be relevant. For example, in a course in architecture you may compare two subway stations (considering the efficiency of the pedestrian patterns, the amenities, and the aesthetic qualities), with the result that you may come to understand both of them more fully; but a comparison of a subway station with a dormitory, no matter how elegantly written, can hardly teach the reader or the writer anything. Nor can a comparison of the House of Commons with the House of Pancakes teach anything, as Judith Stone entertainingly demonstrates