

Formal Visual Analysis: The Elements & Principles of Composition

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Formal analysis is an important technique for organizing visual information. In other words, it is a strategy used to translate what you see into written words. This strategy can be applied to any work of art, from any period in history, whether a photograph, sculpture, painting or cultural artifact.

In any work of art, all of these elements and principles will be present, but some will be more obvious than others. When engaging in formal analysis, students should select the elements they feel are most strongly represented in the piece they are analyzing.

A good place to start formal analysis is to look at a work of art and take note of how your eye moves around the object. Where does your eye go first, and why were you attracted to that part of the image? What colors, textures, and shapes appear in the image? What did the artist include in the composition to guide your eye or to direct your gaze to a certain part of the image?

The Elements

The elements of formal analysis are building blocks that can be combined to create a larger structure.

Line is the most basic building block of formal analysis. Line can be used to create more complex shapes or to lead your eye from one area in the composition to another.

Value is the degree of light and dark in a design. It is the contrast between black and white and all the tones in between. Value can be used with color as well as black and white. Contrast is the extreme changes between values.

Shapes are created when lines are combined to form a square, triangle, or circle. Shapes can be organic (irregular shapes found in nature) or geometric (shapes with strong lines and angles such as circles, triangles, and squares).

Forms are three-dimensional shapes with length, width, and depth. Balls, cylinders, boxes and pyramids are forms.

Space is the area between and around objects. Increasing or decreasing the amount of space around an object affects the way we view that object.

Color differentiates and defines lines, shapes, forms, and space. Even black and white images have a huge number of different shades of gray.

Texture is the surface quality that can be seen and felt. Textures can be rough or smooth, soft or hard. Textures are often implied. For instance, a drawing of a rock might appear to have a rough and hard surface, but in reality is as smooth as the paper on which it is drawn.

The Principles

Notice how the following principles integrate the elements of formal analysis and build on one another.

Balance is created in a work of art when textures, colors, forms, or shapes are combined harmoniously. In this image, notice how the photographer achieves a sense of balance by dividing the image into two sections: one half occupied by trees, and the other half by the water.

Contrast is the use of several elements of design to hold the viewer's attention and to guide the viewer's eye through the artwork. In this image, the texture of the trees contrasts with the texture of the water.

Movement is the way a viewer's eye is directed to move through a composition, often to areas of emphasis. Movement can be directed by lines, contrasting shapes, or colors within the artwork. In this work of art, our eye moves up through the pattern in the rippling surface of the water to the two paddlers. From there, our eye moves to the contrasting textures and colors of the foliage in the top half of the image.

Emphasis is created in a work of art when the artist contrasts colors, textures, or shapes to direct your viewing towards a particular part of the image. In this image, the colors of the paddlers' jackets contrasts with the muted tones of the background. Our attention is immediately drawn to the paddlers, even though they are relatively small in scale.

Pattern is the repetition of a shape, form, or texture across a work of art. The light reflecting off of the waves in the water creates a pattern in the bottom half of the image.

Proportion is created when the sizes of elements in a work of art are combined harmoniously. In this image, all of the proportions appear exactly as one would expect; the human figures are much smaller in scale than the natural world that surrounds them.

Unity is created when the principles of analysis are present in a composition and in harmony. Some images have a complete sense of unity, while some artists deliberately avoid formal unity to create feelings of tension and anxiety. In this image, the large areas of contrasting textures, patterns and colors create a sense of balance and unity within the composition.

- It should be noted that a formal analysis is NOT merely a description. A description is basically just an inventory of the obvious that offers no in depth reading or evaluation of the elements being used. While the content of a work is definitely important, it only constitutes a very small part of what is actually involved in a formal analysis. A formal analysis analyzes the visual elements of a piece and attempts to answer the questions 'why' or 'how:' for example - "why would the artist use this technique" or "how does this shape convey emotion."

Visual analysis tips

In writing a formal analysis or visual analysis paper, the most important thing to remember is that even though you might be thinking "description," this paper does require a **thesis**. Even in a purely visual paper, a thesis gives your paper a point to prove, and thus provides an analytical approach to the object. In the case of a comparison, your thesis should deal with the relationship between the two pieces under discussion, using formal elements to prove the argument.

When you first approach the object, take plenty of time to note down all the visual details of its form that you can. As you look carefully, you will begin to sense an overall organization to the work of art. When you have crystallized that sense into a single sentence, you have produced your thesis. In a formal analysis paper, that thesis will be proven by the visual details of the object which support the thesis.

As you are looking, consider:

Medium (what the object is made of): Be attentive to particular kinds of brushstroke, or ways in which the artist handled the substance that forms the object.

Technique (how the object was made): Notice whether the object was drawn, painted, engraved, carved, cast, etc., and how the artist carried out those processes.

Size: Is it large or small?

Composition (the arrangement of elements in the work): Is there a focal point? Is the composition crowded, open, varied, repetitious? How does your viewpoint affect the work?

Space: Which methods are used to create space—or is there a denial of space? How does the object relate to the space around it?

When writing, try to express what you see with as much precision as possible. Remember the following formal terminology:

Color: Elements of color

- Hue
- Value
- Intensity OR Saturation
- Local color, Optical color, Arbitrary color

Line: Uses of line

- Description
- Expression
- Decoration

Space: Methods for creating space in a 2-D object

- Figure vs. Ground
- Modeling
- Overlap
- Reduction in scale (but remember exceptions to this convention)
- Foreshortening
- Atmospheric Perspective: "Blueing out", reduction of detail, reduction of value contrast
- Vertical Perspective
- Axonometric Projection
- Linear Perspective

Plastic Arts: Elements to consider in sculpture

- Mass
- Volume
- Texture
- Relationship to site

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