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## Writing in Art History

This guide provides a brief introduction to writing in the field of **art history** through the lens of **threshold concepts**. It includes:

- A statement of threshold concepts in art history
  - “So you’re taking an art history course”: A Description of Writing Characteristics Valued in Art History
  - “This is how we write and do research in art history”: Resources for Writers
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### A Statement of Threshold Concepts in Art History

“Seeing comes before words, the child looks and recognizes before it can speak.” (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*)

“Seeing establishes our place in the world.” (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*)

“We do not explain pictures: we explain remarks about pictures.” (Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*)

### Threshold Concept #1: Connections between Looking and Writing

**The statement:** It is not easy to write what you see. If seeing establishes our place in the world, art history is a tool to make sense of the visual world in which we all live.

**What this means for our students:** Looking well is a time-intensive and skilled practice. Visual information is not self-evident, and writing about what is seen involves thinking about how and why visual information is understood in a particular way.

**Where/how we teach this Threshold Concept:** Visual analysis assignment in ART 285; Short essays in 100-level courses. Writing about and describing what is seen is also modeled in class examples and discussions.

### Threshold Concept #2: Context Matters

**The statement:** All art is conditioned by historical and cultural circumstances. Art history endeavors to understand these circumstances or contexts in order to explain the crucial role art occupies in humanity. The contexts that produced the work of art help art historians contextualize why art matters.

**What this means for students:** Art is never understood by its visual appearance or form alone. The goal of art history is to place a work of art within its historic, religious, political, economic, and aesthetic contexts. Students should also understand that various contexts do not stand on their own, but usually overlap. Only by unpacking the circumstances that give rise to a work of art is one able to communicate how art matters and how its meanings change through time and place.

**Where/how we teach this Threshold Concept:** 100-level courses engage with this concept while upper-level courses provide students with practical applications through the execution of research and writing assignments.

### Threshold Concept #3: Frames of interpretation

**The statement:** Art historical writing involves multiple frames of interpretation and—perhaps more importantly—the ability to hold multiple frames in suspension at the same time while producing an original argument. While there is no one “right” interpretation of a work of art, there are interpretations and scholarly arguments that have more quality or staying power than others. (See below for examples of quality art historical arguments)

**What this means for students:** Research done in preparation for writing is framed not only as a search for facts to be relayed to the reader through writing, but also as discourses of interpretation within which the writer seeks to interject. This kind of writing involves a conversation with artworks, contexts, and prior interpretations and scholarship in service of an original argument.

**Where/how we teach this Threshold Concept:** Research papers in upper level courses, at the end of Art 285 and the Art 480 seminar, and as part of the capstone project and honors theses ideally move students through this threshold. Being able to do this involves building upon awareness and skills gained in Threshold Concepts 1 and 2.

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## “So you’re taking an art history course”: A Description of Writing Characteristics Valued in Art History

Art history is rooted in the study of visual, performed, and material expression. Goals for our work include interpretation, producing frameworks, narratives, and histories to understand the human experience and condition, and the expansion of what is considered “art”. We want you to know that there are some key things that we value in our field. We value the **complexity of seeing and the diversity of different ways of seeing**. We tend not to value or prioritize subjective opinion and unsubstantiated claims.

What is considered effective or good writing in our field varies by genre and purpose, but overall we expect to see:

- a direct address of the subject or work of art.
- an interpretive analysis of a work of art backed by research from credible sources.
- engagement with significant interpretive and theoretical frameworks.

Writers in our field must provide evidence for their claims. We understand evidence to include:

- Formal analysis. Formal analysis is the description of the visual and material features of an object to support an argument. It can include a consideration of color, line, size, weight, form, shape, depth. Formal analysis is often a place to generate questions for research.
- Biographical records or artists’ statements
- Archival records
- Ethnographic data
- Historical events
- Significant secondary literature
- Adjacent artistic and cultural production (music, literature, theatre, etc.)

Writers in our field seem credible when they:

- Address current and historical debates about the interpretation of a topic
- Demonstrate an awareness of the historical and cultural context of a topic
- Cite credible sources accurately. [Credible sources \(credible-sources/index.html\)](#) include peer-reviewed journals, books, or websites from reputable institutions and organizations.
- For more information on citing sources accurately, see the [“Quick Guide to Citations for Art Historical Writing \(citations/index.html\)”](#)

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## This is how we write and do research in Art History

Art historical writing is about analyzing works of art to make a point or argument. Not every student in our classes needs to be able to write in the professional way of the field. However, depending on the reasons for taking our courses, we want students to become proficient and comfortable with analyzing art and the important place writing occupies in that process. Students taking an art history course should expect to write in the following genres:

- research papers
- exhibition reviews/evaluations

- book reviews
- visual analyses
- reading reflection/canvas posts
- museum labels
- essay exams

**Writing goals and outcomes are different depending on the level of the course.** For example:

- **Undergraduates taking Miami Plan (100-level) or elective courses** should recognize the relationship between how to develop a thesis and employ visual evidence in support of that thesis. Such a skill is undoubtedly useful for all students since looking closely coupled with the ability to make sense of what one sees are crucial for many other kinds of writing and ways of thinking. We argue the complexity and diversity of “looking deeply” is too often taken for granted in the visual world in which we live. In 100-level classes, students start to become familiar with how to write and think about art.
- **Undergraduates majoring in our field** should recognize that art historical writing is approached as a conversation or dialogue. As students progress through the major, being able to place a topic and research paper within previous published and ongoing debates is crucial. In other words, students should start to understand that writing in Art History is about creating a dialog between one’s ideas and the sources the student engages. We also want our students to understand the value of inserting their own voice when writing. Over time, majors will need to become skilled at synthesizing their ideas and arguments with original research. This very process is how objects tell us something distinctive about their historical context and their value within human history.

## Resources for Art History Writers

The following resources were developed by Miami University Art History faculty with their undergraduate students in mind:

- [Revision and the Writing Process \(writing-process/index.html\)](#)
- [Locating and Engaging Credible Sources \(credible-sources/index.html\)](#)
- [Quick Guide to Citations for Art Historical Writing \(citations/index.html\)](#)
- [Annotated Sample Paper: Art 188: History of Western Art \(Renaissance to Modern\) \(annotated-paper-art-188/index.html\)](#)
- [Annotated Sample Paper: Read, Look, Reflect Essay on Michelangelo’s Sonnets & \*Awakening Slave\* \(annotated-read-look-reflect-essay/index.html\)](#)

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