

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

To write about a work of art, begin with an observation of its key formal elements and analyze its visual characteristics (formal analysis). However, in contextual analysis, the primary exercise of looking must then extend into the realm of research. Sound research allows us to connect the artwork's formal achievements to historical and cultural purposes and meanings.

A successful contextual analysis will include formal analysis, a discussion of who made it, when and where it was made, its patronage and/or social purpose, and its cultural meaning and significance.

Start researching your artwork with the following questions as a guide. Also bear in mind your conclusions from your formal analysis, as you will need to refer to the work's visual characteristics to back up your thesis. When researching, be sure to search for both specific information on the work of art and its artist, as well as for more general information about the work's culture, era, and style or artistic movement.

Maker

- Who made it? A known individual, an anonymous one, or a group of people?
- What was the social status of the artist/craftsperson in its culture?
- If the artist is known, is there information about his or her life, other artworks, or ideas that you can apply to understand the work of art you are analyzing?

History and Culture

- Is the exact date known, or debated?
- In what cultural tradition or era was it made?
- How does the style of this artwork vary from the style of similar works of its era, and what does that tell us?
- How does its style compare with similar art that came before and after it?
- What has happened to the work in terms of its physical condition or status over time?

Patronage or Purpose

- Was the artwork commissioned, or made for sale?
- Why was the work of art made?
- Who paid for it, and what does that tell us? (Art historians call this patronage.)
- Who would have seen this artwork, and where?
- Is there cultural and religious symbolism (iconography) in the work?

Always keep notes about the sources of your information for your essay's Works Cited section.

While conducting your research, begin formulating a working thesis. A thesis must be specific, and use both formal and contextual analysis to better your reader's understanding of the work's meaning and/or social purpose. Your essay should integrate insights gained from your observations and formal analysis with conclusions based on your research. Continue to revise your thesis as you develop your essay so that you make a successful argument about the work of art.