

Tips for Art History Students

Art History classes are somewhat different from other humanities classes you may have taken, such as History and English. Art history requires different study skills and a visual memory that you may not have practiced before now. Below are some tips for succeeding in an Art History class (although many of these tips are relevant to any college class).

1. Attendance

As with any college course, it is vital that you come to every class. If you do miss a class, you should get copy a colleague's notes, but keep in mind that notes are memory aids. You may not understand your colleague's notes, as they made them with the intent of sparking their own memory and not with the intent of recreating the lecture for you. This is especially true for art history classes. It is nearly impossible to learn from lecture notes without the benefit of the images that are shown in conjunction with the lecture.

Lectures are meant to build upon each other. You will not fully understand succeeding lectures after you've missed one. Along those same lines, tardiness is detrimental. Professors usually give an overview at the beginning of the class. If you miss this part, you may not fully understand the point of the material that is being covered.

2. Attentiveness

Attendance alone is not sufficient. You need to also pay attention and engage with the lecture. There is no way to acquire an education passively. Lectures will also be more interesting if you pay attention and participate by answering or asking questions and by taking careful notes.

To help yourself pay attention, sit in one of the front rows of the class, have paper and pen ready, turn off and put away your cell phone, computer, and iPod, and have had a good night's sleep, so you will not risk falling asleep in the dark room. Bring coffee or tea with you if that will help you to stay alert.

3. Readings

It is up to you whether you do the textbook reading before or after the lecture. You may understand the lectures better and will find them more interesting if you do so. In either case, keep up with your readings and review the readings with your class notes.

Plan ahead. If one week is especially heavy with reading or other assignments, start readings for that lecture ahead of time, partitioning out readings so that your workload is manageable.

4. Taking notes

Taking notes in class takes practice. It sometimes seems difficult to know what is important to write down. Try to focus on overarching ideas rather than small details. Notice what the professor mentions or shows more than once. These ideas or artworks are likely to be on the exam. If a slide appears

repeatedly, put an asterisk by the information in your notes.

Within a day of each lecture, you should look over your notes and flesh out some of the information that you may not have had a chance to get during class.

Feel free to ask for clarification of information—either during class or afterwards during office hours. While it not appropriate to ask a professor to give you notes or a recap of the class if you missed it, it is absolutely appropriate for you to discuss information that your learned in class and about which you wish to understand more fully.

5. Studying for exams

Do not wait until the last minute to study for exams. You should be going over your notes and keeping up with your readings throughout the semester. If you keep up with the readings and spend a little time reviewing materials every few days or every week, there should be no need for you to have to cram the night before the exam. You will be much better served on the day of the exam by having had a good night's sleep than by trying to learn many weeks' worth of information in the few late-night or early-morning hours before the exam.

Good ways to study for slide IDs are to make study sheets and flashcards. For each artwork that you need to know, make a card. On one side of the card, make a drawing of the object. Make the drawing as detailed as possible; the act of drawing the work of art will help you to really look at it and to become familiar with it.

After you draw the image on one side, write all the information pertinent to the artwork that you find in your notes and book on the other side. You can use this as a flashcard to test yourself.

In addition to making flash cards, you should make study sheets for each of the historical periods or themes that we covered in class. Write the general characteristics the art of the period and also pertinent information about the historical background.

The exams will ask you to compare works of art from different periods. Test yourself by picking two works and comparing them. Ask yourself how they are different or similar and what about their historical circumstances explains their particular visual features.

I also recommend studying in groups. Take turns explaining the information to each other. If you can explain an idea in your own words to a friend or classmate, it is very likely you will be able to explain it on the exam.

6. Taking Exams

Art History exams require showing you have memorized information and also that you can critically analyze works of art. You will have to identify works of art that you have memorized (by using your flashcards), giving their titles, names of the artist (if known), date, and location. That is only a minor part of art history exams, however.

The most important part of the exam is to show that you can discuss and critically analyze works of art, comparing them to other works.

In a comparison, the two works of art will usually have some things in common but probably will have significant differences. For instance, two images of rulers from different time periods will allow you to discuss how historical circumstances affected the way that the rulers were portrayed at different periods in time.

For a comparison, you will only have a short time to write an essay. Take a minute or two to write an outline to help organize your thoughts. Your essay can begin with describing the similarities. Next you should discuss the historical circumstances that explain the differences between the artworks.

Keep in mind that art history is HISTORY. Your analysis should be grounded in the historical information that you have learned in class and in your book. You are not just describing the artworks, nor are you just giving your opinion of their quality. Rather, you are explaining how their historical situation and social and cultural contexts explains why the artists chose to make them look the way that they did.

A helpful video series is found at <http://www.samford.edu/how-to-study/>.