TIPS FOR WRITING AN ART HISTORY PAPER

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I highly recommend the book A Short Guide to Writing about Art by Sylvan Barnet. It is an excellent resource for writing various types of art historical essays.

General Guidelines:

The body of the papers written for this class should be in 12-point type, preferably in Times New Roman. The pages should be single-sided and double-spaced, with one-inch margins.

Keep to the assigned number of pages. Part of the challenge of these assignments is to work within the allotted limitations. Writing for more than asked does not mean you have written a better paper. Writing clearly and succinctly is more difficult, but also usually more effective for getting your ideas across.

On the other hand, a paper much shorter than what was assigned probably does not offer enough information to completely fulfill the requirements.

***Papers must be stapled when they are turned in.

Guidelines for writing citations:

Some assignments ask that you not do any research and so you may not have any citations in your paper. If you do use any ideas or information that you got from any source, you MUST cite it. Neglecting to give credit to a source is plagiarism (see my handout on plagiarism).

If your paper includes citations, use footnotes, endnotes or parenthetical citations and have a bibliography of works cited in alphabetical order at the end of the paper. Please follow the following format:

For parenthetical citations use:
(Smith, p. 15)
N.B. If there are two authors with the same last name (or two works by the same author) on your bibliography, include an initial or a date to distinguish between them, such as (Smith, 2002, p. 15) or (N. Smith, p. 15).

Give as little information within the parentheses as possible. Long parenthetical citations interrupt the flow of your text and can be distracting and confusing. If you have more to add than the brief citation, put that information in a footnote.
For footnotes and endnotes use:
Author, *Title* (City: Publisher, year), page number or numbers.
e.g.: John Smith, *Art History* (London: Thames Press, 2002), p. 15. [or pp. 15-17 for multiple pages]
After the first time you cite a source, if you cite it again, give a abbreviated citation.
e.g. Smith, p. 15.
N.B. If there are two authors with the same last name (or two works by the same author) on your bibliography, include an initial or a date to distinguish between them. e.g. Smith, 2002, p. 15. or N. Smith, p. 15.

Footnotes and endnotes use slightly different formats for citations than are used in works cited lists.

For works cited list use:
Author. *Title*. City: Publisher, year. [List should be in alphabetical order by authors last name and does not include page numbers.]

When to cite:
You should cite a source anytime you use another person’s ideas or research. A good rule of thumb is “if in doubt, cite.” It is better to footnote too much than not enough.

You can also cite ideas you heard in class or that were suggested to you by a professor or colleague. In the body of your text, by writing something like: “As Professor Smith pointed out in his April 24th lecture, ....” Or you can write a footnote that relates this information. Just make sure to always give others credit for their ideas and research.

***You must footnote both direct quotes and ideas that you rewrite and put into your own words.***

Note on using direct quotations:

If you are writing a research paper, you will be using other people’s ideas and information and will need to give credit. But, you should summarize their information and put it into your own words-followed by a footnote that explains from where the information came. You should not directly quote facts or descriptions. It is lazy to rely on other authors to do work you should do yourself. Only use direct quotes when you are giving information that you need to argue against or that backs up your argument. A very good paper may have no direct quotations at all.

Writing Tips:

There is no magic formula for writing a good essay. I try to make assignments open-ended enough that you will be able to be creative and write an essay that is of interest to you. That does not however mean that these are
easy assignments or that anything is acceptable. What I shall be looking for as I assess your work is that you have carefully observed the work of art, that you asked relevant question, and that you tried to come up with answers that are grounded in the visual evidence.

***I shall also be expecting a **well-written** essay, which means it should be polished and without grammatical errors or spelling mistakes. It should also be **well organized** and **persuasive**. Although this is not an English class, good writing is always necessary for getting your point across, regardless of the subject matter. You cannot separate what you say from how you say it.

**Tips for organization:**

1. It is usually best to tell your reader in the first paragraph what your topic is (the work or works of art you will be discussing) and what you will be arguing. Your first paragraph does not have to be dry and businesslike, however. You can also use this paragraph to hook you audience with a relevant anecdote or piece of information (the key word here is relevant).

2. You may want to follow this with a general description of the way the artwork looks and its function. You want to give your reader the overview before you start narrowing in on the details. A good rule of thumb is to begin with the general and become more specific.

3. Following paragraphs will point out the different aspects that support your argument. Try to come up with a logical progression for your argument: do not simply offer a list of observations. Use paragraph breaks to indicate a change in topic. There is no proscribed number of paragraphs. You should use as many or as few as you need to make your point and organize your essay effectively.

4. The final paragraph should sum up your argument and present your assessment of the work of art as a whole. Here, you will again return to a more general view and explain why all the specifics of your argument lead to your overall impression.

**Tips for writing persuasively:**

1. Keep in mind that this is not simply a document of your opinion. You are trying to persuade your reader to accept your point of view. Your job is to use concrete examples that are visible in the work of art that help support your ideas. You must help your reader to see these details and to see them the way that you do.

2. Always keep a skeptical reader in mind. As you read over each paragraph, ask yourself questions: “Have I made this idea clear?” “Does the evidence support my argument?”
3. Play the devil’s advocate. Imagine a reader with the opposite point of view and try to sway her by pointing out how the visual evidence supports your view better.

4. Make sure all the information you include is necessary to your argument. The most effective essays get right to the point and don’t get off track. All writers have a tendency to want to include all their interesting observations. But remember, your purpose is to write a persuasive paper, not to point out everything that you notice about a work of art.

5. All good writing is revised, sometimes multiple times. You should write a first draft and look at it later after you have had a break. Looking at something after a day or two away from it will allow you to see things you missed. It is also very useful to read your writing out loud. This is the best way to catch awkward language and things that don’t make sense.

6. It also helps to have a friend or colleague read and comment on your work. They can best tell you what doesn’t make sense, what needs to be clarified, and what parts are unnecessary.

7. Always keep your audience in mind and write at the level that they would expect. For class assignments, your audience is in reality the professor. However, you should write as if your fellow classmates were going to read the essay (an educated but not a specialist audience). Tailor your tone and the amount of information to them.

8. Use proper grammar and check your spelling. You will undermine your argument if you seem to not have a grasp of the basic mechanics of writing because your reader will not take you seriously.